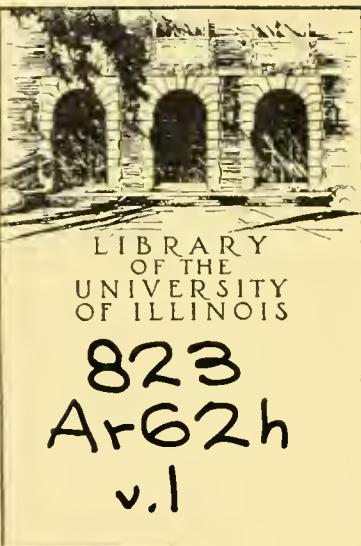


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HEVER COURT.

HEVER COURT.

BY

R. ARTHUR ARNOLD,

AUTHOR OF "RALPH," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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Inscribed

TO

MY DEAR WIFE.

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HEVER COURT.

CHAPTER I.

CLARA.

“THE White Horse, by Thos. Smithson,” meaning not the artist but the host, was certainly the most prominent object in the village of Bingwell. Between the courtyard of the inn, which was rarely unoccupied by the vehicle of some thirsty traveller, and the dusty turnpike road, this well-known sign-board swung on a little gallows of its own ; while a ragged patch of green beneath

seemed to warn irreverent wheels from too familiar an approach to this emblem of hospitality.

For miles round, and far to right and left along the high road, the Smithsons were consequential people, far more important among waggoners and drovers than almost anybody, except perhaps the last notorious murderer. This was because everyone knew them, and they formed a common subject of conversation for passing acquaintance, and not unfrequently a ground of introduction. Tom Smithson, “Old Tom,” as he was familiarly called, had but recently died. He was still spoken of as a “very ’spectable man, a rare judge of a glass o’ ale,” but Mrs. Smithson was most often the subject

of conversation. If the speaker were favourable, she was a “comfor’ble ’ooman, with allus a word to say for herself; ay, an’ a sharp ’un too;” but if perchance he had rudely felt the force of Mrs. Smithson’s tongue, she was “Mother Smithson, as warn’t none too good, and throwed all her money on to that there gal o’ hearn.”

Clara Smithson was a niece of the land-lady of the White Horse: she had been for some years an orphan, and had occupied a position as lady’s-maid in a nobleman’s family before coming to live with her uncle and aunt. Rarely indeed do the rustic visitors of the tap-room catch a sight of Miss Clara, but they often talk of her haughtiness and her beauty. For hers is

the beauty they admire, strong and intoxicating. She is just now approaching the door, apparently returning from a walk. Through the gauze of her short “fall,” her dark rich brown eyes shine out as if they were unveiled, and her massy black hair contrasts well with the bright red feather in her hat. She is well dressed, has a firm, graceful step, and a foot and ankle, the first sight of which condones the coquetry of the looped-up black silk dress, and rather short and very highly-coloured petticoat. Her face is beautiful ; but at this moment she is paler than usual, and the lower part of her countenance, which has its bad features, appears somewhat heavy and prominent.

Paying no attention to the shy nods of

one or two men standing about the door, Clara walked hastily through the house and up-stairs to her own room. When the door was shut and locked, she seemed to free herself from an effort of self-control too great to be long endured.

“ Fool,” she exclaimed, flinging off her hat and mantle, “ what a fool I am ! ” Then her lips quivered with an emotion portending tears, but Clara shed few tears, and her eyes now defied the suspicion.

She was staring at herself in her looking-glass, conscious of every good point in her rounded figure ; her face was fresh flushed with shame and anger, with jealousy, for she was in her thoughts now comparing her fair face with that of another girl about her own

age, whom but a half an hour since she had seen riding with a young gentleman in a wooded lane not far from her aunt's door.

“How I do hate her!” she muttered, and then stepping quickly to a drawer, she took out a photograph of a very young man, standing, but certainly not at ease, in the uniform of a yeomanry regiment. His face bore just the pencilled promise of a moustache ; his features were regular, handsome, and manly, but refined rather than strong. His eyes could scarcely prove of such deep ultramarine as the photographer's artist had given to them, but the sun could not have been an untrue witness to the straightness of his nose, or the delicate curves which gave

a womanly sweetness to his mouth and chin, nor did it seem that the waving curls of his brown hair were merely artistic—they were too natural, too graceful, to be anything but real.

It was a wretched performance, and the trumpery gilt frame in which it was set was mindful of the itinerant artist; but evidently it was one of Clara's greatest treasures. As her eyes fell upon it, a passionate, longing love seemed to overspread her countenance; she appeared to have forgotten her jealousy. In a tone of relenting languor, “Edward” left her lips. Then, as if her recent anger again swept across her mind, she clenched the little portrait, and flinging it to the ground, stamped and stamped upon

it till her sharp brass-armed heels had pounded it into an indistinguishable ruin.

“Why does he—how can he love that straw-faced little——” But Clara was in too great a rage to be able to find the epithet she wished to apply to her rival. And just now the sound of horses’ feet cantering along the road outside her window, gave another direction to her thoughts.

She flew to the window in time to receive a laughing nod from a young man, evidently the “Edward” of the photograph. Hesitating how to acknowledge it, she saw by the quick turn of the young lady, at whose side he was riding, that he had spoken of her. Shrinking from the recognition of the face she hated, Clara stepped

backwards until they had passed out of sight.

“I never thought of having him myself; but if I don’t, you sha’n’t, Miss Lucy Denman, I *will* prevent that.”

And after this vindictive resolution, Clara smoothed her hair, and went down-stairs to join her aunt in the parlour of the inn.

CHAPTER II.

CONTENT AND DISCONTENT.

MRS. SMITHSON looked quite at home in the parlour of the White Horse. The little round tubs, so brightly green, and bound with gilded hoops, were not less angular than the stout hostess, but the low drizzle of their tiny taps faintly resembled the loud laugh of Clara's worthy aunt. She had often tried upon some of the greatest topers in Bingwell to mark the line between refreshment and intoxication ; and often her hand refused to draw more beer for some already

staggering sot. Yet in these matters Mrs. Smithson's line was not a hard one. Indeed, she had often said "she'd no objection to draw for them as went home quiet, and slept it off, but she wouldn't make them as was natural bad men, violent to their wives and little uns with drink." Her good nature was proverbial, and her reputation for popularity stood high in the village.

No one else had, or seemed to have, the slightest influence over Clara. And to her aunt the girl was a puzzle. Her affection came in gusts, variable and uncertain. At one time she would be disdainful to all around her, and soon afterwards ready to take the humblest share in any household duties. But the old woman loved her niece

as the only person left to her large tender heart, and was secretly very proud of Clara's haughty and, as she thought, superior manners.

She saw at once by the girl's pouting lips and flushed face that something had occurred to ruffle her temper, and with her accustomed shrewdness Mrs. Smithson at once united cause and effect, as she remembered the noisy hoofs of Edward's and Lucy's horses, which, through the narrow opening between the two red moreen curtains, she had seen from the window but a few moments before.

Soothingly the aunt asked "what had put her out," and lovingly called her "Clarey," wanting to touch and kiss her pretty niece,

but Clara flung herself down upon a chair, replying, “Oh, nothing, aunt!” and then, when further pressed, “Oh, bother!” So the disappointed hostess waddled out of the parlour upon a pretence of something to do elsewhere, leaving her niece alone with her vexation.

Restless in her seat, Clara seemed to be looking around her with disgust at the accessories and furniture of the parlour. Her mind was not sufficiently elevated in sentiment to hate the place because it reeked of intemperance, and was suggestive of nothing but toping; she was fretting with misery because her surroundings were not those which appertained to a “lady.” For Clara was ambitious as she was wilful and

headstrong. Hers was not the refinement that was positively offended by the odour which came from the bright pewter sink beneath the beer engine. If it had been the fashion among duchesses to draw beer in this manner for themselves and their households, she would have admired this article of furniture. If the dining-rooms of the rich had been placarded with tinselled advertisements of “Kinahan’s LL,” of “Cream Gin,” of “Bett’s Patent Capsuled Brandy ;” with the highly-coloured announcements of “All-sop” and “Bass,” those that hung in her aunt’s parlour would not have been such an annoyance to her now. They seemed to be staring at her ; these gay, hateful placards, which her aunt thought so beautiful and

dusted so carefully, jeered her and her longings to rise above such associations as those of a village public house.

She had inherited much of her elegance from her mother, who had been lady's maid in the same family in which Clara herself had served. Her father, Mrs. Smithson's brother, a loutish butcher in comfortable circumstances, had been easily won by a few words of her mother's ; but no one who had known them could understand how so pretty a woman had bestowed herself upon Bill Smithson. Not much had ever been known concerning the birth or parentage of Clara's mother. "There was a good deal of the quality about her," the hostess of the White Horse had told her niece, and so no doubt

there was. No one believed that both the maternal grandfather and grandmother of Clara were people in a humble station of life ; and some accounted for her mother's marriage with Bill Smithson by a story touching her disappointed love for a more highly-bred admirer.

So it may be that Clara was born with an instinctive claim to a higher position than that which circumstances had given to her.

Lady Anne Dunkeld had been a kind mistress to her, and Clara had well weighed the relative advantages of the two situations when her aunt's pressing invitation to share her home as her adopted daughter came to her at Lord Dunkeld's London house.

Love for her aunt had nothing to do with her decision. She balanced the pleasant and congenial atmosphere of a nobleman's house, the liberal wages and perquisites which rewarded her not onerous service, in one scale, and the boorish society of the Bingwell tap-room, the unappreciating clodhoppers, with no soul for the elegant adjustment of ribbons or the millinery in which Clara was an adept, and independence, in the other. And she chose independence and the White Horse, reasoning that she was more likely to "get on" from such a base of operations, than from the very definite condition of a lady's maid.

She could trust to the easy good-nature of her aunt to allow her time to be entirely at

her own disposal ; she would be at no one's call, she could make journeys as "Miss Smithson," speaking of her aunt as a person of some property "down in the country ;" and as matrimony in the shape of a successful match was always in Clara's mental horizon, she thought, too, that her chances in this respect would be considerably improved by leaving Lady Anne's service ; "for though," she argued with herself, "lady's maids see a great many gentlemen, yet it doesn't often happen that a lady's maid marries a gentleman."

Surveying her field of operations at Bingwell, she had long since fixed upon Edward Frankland as the most valuable prize within her neighbourhood, but by the working of

her strong passions upon her self-interested will and intention, she had come to love most intensely this man for whom at the first she had thought from ambitious motives. His image had dwelt in her mind until she almost conceived that she, and she only, had a right to him. That he should be loved by, or should belong to another woman, she was inclined to resent as a personal wrong done to herself.

“Why don’t you get out of this nasty old place ?” she said, sullenly, to her aunt, who now re-appeared bearing a jug full of gin to fill the little green tub appropriated to that “cordial.”

“What ! leave the Horse ! Why, Clarey, what should I do with myself ?” Mrs.

Smithson stood, jug in hand, full of astonishment.

"Do with yourself? You could be a lady, and keep a pony carriage, and all that."

"Lawk! Me in a carridge!" Mrs. Smithson's laugh burst out as she tried in vain to look at her waist.

"We shouldn't be insulted then, perhaps," Clara mumbled; "looked down upon as dirt."

"Why do yer worrit yerself about 'em, and whether they looks here or looks there. 'Taint no use trying to make gentlefolks o' me. And I b'lieve I should die."

There was a touch of melancholy in her aunt's last words intended to appeal to

Clara's love. For the old woman delighted in her business, was proud of her position, and would have been quite happy if she could have made Clara contented. But already she began to comprehend that this was out of her power. She continued :

“ Well, s'pose you had yer pony carridge, what then ? ”

“ I shouldn't be a barmaid any longer.”

“ Did I ever ask you to touch the ingin ? Hain't I always kep you off from it ? Was I——”

Clara interrupted her aunt with a gesture of impatience. “ Oh, I am not complain-ing,” she said, impatiently, rising from her chair and walking up and down the little parlour, her aunt's eyes following her sadly

with all the regularity of a pendulum. It was hard for her to understand that Clara's ambition soared above the White Horse. To Mrs. Smithson this parlour, with all its bright drinking apparatus, was a place of no little state and dignity. Her mind was even now running back over the many, many happy days and years she and her husband had passed in this house; and slowly, painfully, and sadly realising the difference between Clara and herself. "If she could find such a husband for her as 'Old Tom' had been to herself, would this make her niece happy?" Mrs. Smithson felt no confidence that any man of Old Tom's stamp would satisfy Clara. Shrewd and sensible as she was, the hostess perceived

that Clara's was a complaint for which she could prescribe no remedy. But she would do her best, and obeying the instinct of her kindly heart, laid her big, red hand on Clara, and coaxed her into a seat.

"Never mind, dearey ;" Mrs. Smithson laid her face against the girl's, " tell me all about it. I ain't a lady woman, but old creetur as I am, I've knowed well what it was to——"

Clara looked up quickly, and with a half angry expression of face, but the evident reality of sympathy in her aunt's fat face at once melted her, and caused her arm to steal round Mrs. Smithson's neck.

" You dear old aunt !" she said, and then a flood of tears relieved her.

"Tell me, my lovey," the old woman went on, "has he been saying anything to you?"

"He! Who?"

"Master Edward, to be sure; you ain't a crying for nobody else, I know."

"I'm not crying for him," replied Clara, proudly, lifting herself a little from her aunt's tender embrace.

"Take care you don't, Clarey, there's no good can come of it."

"Why not, aunt?"

"Why?" Mrs. Smithson released her, and stood apart in amazement. "You wouldn't set yerself up to be the Squire's wife?"

"I wouldn't be anything else," replied

Clara, with perfect self-confidence, and then relapsed into her bad humour.

“That’s what they all say, my dear ; you mind where you’re going. But why trouble your mind with such as him ? There’s James Logan, the wheelwright, as upstanding a man as any in Bingwell ; he worships the ground you walk on, he do, and you won’t so much as speak a word to him. I don’t say nothing about Will Campbell, as is only a by-blow of the old Squire’s ; he ain’t altogether to my mind, but ’pend upon it them’s the happiest that keeps closest to their own sort o’ people ; and though there’s no denying you’ve the ways of a lady, yet you know you ain’t quality born.”

Clara had listened with growing displeasure, and before the hostess had finished her speech, her niece had left her alone in the parlour.

CHAPTER III.

THE “MAUVAIS SUJET” OF BINGWELL.

HEVER COURT had been the residence of the Franklands for centuries. But the house had been rebuilt about a hundred years ago, and was one of those roomy, square, red-bricked mansions which one associates with moderate wealth, high respectability, and great comfort. The year's mourning, which was customary in the family for the departed owner, had nearly been accomplished for the father of the “young Squire,” as the present incumbent was called. Mr. Edward

Frankland, whom we have seen riding past the “White Horse,” lived here with his widowed mother; and the gossips in the village said that soon after the mourning was over, he was to marry Miss Lucy Denman, the daughter of Sir John Denman, an old friend and neighbour of his father’s. The grief of Mrs. Frankland and her son for the loss of their husband and father was, perhaps, rather dutiful than real. He had married late in life, and had always been extremely cold and reserved in his manner, even towards his wife and child. He and Sir John had been companions and friends in youth and early manhood, and many strange stories were whispered throughout the neighbourhood as to the reasons which

made Mr. Frankland so very uncommunicative.

But one fact was so well known in the village, that it had ceased to be thought a scandal. There was no doubt that Will Campbell, who was better known as “handsome Will,” was a son of the late Mr. Frankland. His mother was well remembered by the Bingwell gossips. Amy Campbell was the pretty daughter of the village schoolmaster, who brought her father to grief, and at length, it was said, to his grave, by running away from him with the young Squire. After a year’s absence, during which her friends had no tidings of her, and only suspected, from previous gossip, her intimacy with Mr. Frankland, she returned to Bing-

well with her baby boy. She was lovingly received by her father, who was in his last illness. Hever Court was then in the care of the housekeeper, and uninhabited by any of the family until Mr. Frankland's subsequent marriage with the mother of Edward. Amy had no story to tell, or would tell none ; she said she had not been married, but the avowal was evidently made with great reluctance ; that she had quarrelled with Mr. Frankland and left him ; that she never wished to see him again, and that all she feared was lest he should take her boy away from her. But her health was very feeble, her beauty faded ; and before Mr. Frankland saw his home again, she and her father had died, leaving little Will in charge of a

neighbour, who promised to be a "mother to him." And it was rumoured that on her death-bed she had made strange confessions.

Perhaps it was not Mrs. Prickett's fault that Will had become the notorious *mauvais sujet* of the village. She was a woman who, as she described herself, "got her own livin' by doing a bit o' nussin', and a bit o' charin', and what not, though she had a bit o' money as her old man left her, when he was took bad and died with the fever." But Mrs. Prickett had a stronger sense of natural rights than of self-interest, and very early in Will's life she had quarrelled with Mrs. Frankland, who did not like that he should associate in any way with her child, and neither the good washerwoman nor the lady

were notable for conciliation. It may be owing to this circumstance, and to a suspicion which Mrs. Prickett always entertained that poor Amy had been married to Mr. Frankland, that she had, unconsciously perhaps, made Will an idle, discontented man, hating his father's family, and regarding them, to some extent, as defrauding him of his natural rights.

His doating foster-mother set down all his faults as due rather to his father than to himself, and she seemed ready to make any sacrifice rather than that he should be in any way dependent on the Franklands. Time after time Mr. Frankland had made Will offers of employment upon his estate, or of recommendation to obtain a situation

elsewhere. But Will repulsed them rudely. "He was quite contented where he was," he said, and "Why didn't the Squire want to send Master Edward away?" and so he had continued lazily to farm the dozen acres of land which Mrs. Prickett held of Bingwell Manor. But it was not upon twelve acres that Will had become the best shot in the country round Bingwell, nor on the profits of his husbandry that he kept a fast-trotting mare and a couple of lurchers. Indeed, it was well-known that Will was a deer-stealer and a poacher, and one of Mr. Frankland's most vivid troubles had been lest he should find his son brought as a prisoner before him as a magistrate. But this had never happened.

There were, however, two subjects upon which Mrs. Prickett “had words” with Will. He was not an idle, ignorant, rustic sot ; on the contrary, he was cunning, cool, reserved ; he was never seen to be “the worse for liquor,” but he was incorrigibly lazy ; with immense powers of enjoyment, but little of the honest energy of acquisition. Mrs. Prickett would have had him search every parish registry in England in the hope of finding evidence of his mother’s marriage. She was never tired of scolding him for his indolence in this matter ; nor did she patiently listen to his yawning assurance that “mother wouldn’t ha’ died without saying something about it, if there’d been any wedding.” But Will had nothing to plead

for himself when she rated him for his frequent visits to the White Horse. Whenever she saw Will making an extra-fine toilet, she broke out at him. For Mrs. Prickett had long ago found out Will's secret. She knew that he loved Clara Smithson—or, to say worshipped her, would be more correct. When his foster-mother told him Clara "would never have him as he was," the sad, conscious truth went coldly home to Will's heart. And when she followed this shaft up by another, directed at Clara's extravagance and expensive habits, saying, that they would "both be in the workhus in a month if they was married," Will couldn't venture to contest the truth of the remark.

Mrs. Prickett's friend and counsellor was Mr. Pitcher, the parish clerk and sexton of Bingwell. Many and many a time they had talked together as to the possibility of Will's legitimacy. And Mr. Pitcher, whose faith in parish books was profound, often found himself thinking of it while he turned the mouldy pages of the Bingwell archives. About a month ago he had received a visit from a smart lawyer's clerk, representing a firm in Gray's Inn, who wished to refer to the registry concerning the births, marriages, and deaths of a family named Talboys; and Mr. Pitcher, thinking the opportunity too good to be lost, hazarded a question as to "whether there was parish clerks in Lunnun?"

Mr. Gribble, representing Messrs. Surcharge and Stamps, who had long since won his spurs as “a sharp young man,” very soon saw that Mr. Pitcher had a purpose in his questions, and the conference ended by Mr. Gribble paying a visit to Mrs. Prickett, and leaving her with the conviction that somewhere, probably in London, might be found the certificate of Mr. Frankland’s marriage with Amy Campbell. Mrs. Prickett had given him no retainer, but her manner had been so mysteriously confidential, she had so suspiciously impressed upon him the necessity of secrecy, of avoiding all advertising, of not giving the least publicity to his inquiries, which might reach the ears of the family, that as Mr. Gribble walked back to

the railway station, smoking a penny cigar and swinging gaily a sixpenny walking-cane, he thought more and more that there was something in it, that “the old woman could say more if she liked :” in fact, he felt that he “had got hold of a good thing,” and would spare no trouble in his search for evidence.

CHAPTER IV.

LOVE IN A COTTAGE.

No sooner had Mr. Gribble passed out of sight than Mrs. Prickett was seized with a longing to loosen her mind by converse with her friend the clerk. But it would not do that she should be observed to make a special visit, for though neither of them were young, yet Mr. Pitcher was unmarried. So, taking her bonnet from a peg behind the door, and throwing a shawl over her shoulders, Mrs. Prickett sauntered down the little street, hoping to find Pitcher some-

where about his house, that she might avoid the appearance of an intended call. She was not disappointed. As she approached the little wooden cottage where the parish clerk lived, with his rather ill-favoured sister Betsy, Mrs. Prickett saw Pitcher at work in his garden.

Now, though Mr. Pitcher was for six days in the week only a second-class agricultural labourer, yet, by consequence of his functions on the Sunday he had become a respecter of persons. He held himself quite above the commonalty of the village. He always addressed Mrs. Prickett as “mum,” but then, though she had property, her husband had been his predecessor in office, and therefore there was some relationship between them.

In person he was but a little man, in physical strength so feeble that farmer Styles would only give him eighteen-pence a day for his labour ; but on Sundays he had his sweet revenge upon those great, brawny, more highly paid neighbours of his. For they trudged to church in buskins and smock frocks, and when they were inside the walls had to sit on a ricketty form in the cold aisle, or were huddled together in the little gallery where they lolled, sleeping on their arms, till one of the singers chalked the number of the hymn on a black board and lowered it over the gallery for the information of the congregation, then the tuning of Bob Sutton's double-bass awoke them. But Jimmy Pitcher's life was nobler than this.

From a tall gentleman, the former rector, he had received the gift of a blue cloth tail-coat, a buff waistcoat, and a tall hat. It was Jimmy's delight to wear these garments on Sunday. Far below his knees flapped the tails,—a world too wide for his body was this coat ; his head was half buried in its ample collar, and little indeed could be seen of him when topped by the hat. But Pitcher never doubted that his “buff and blue” fitted him admirably, and during all the six working days he seemed to slink about the parish ashamed of the smock frock and corduroys in which he laboured.

He spoke with a little, reedy, piping voice, but consequentially ; his features were small and pinched. Along one side of his nose

ran a blue sear which was the torment of Jimmy's life. Not that it gave him actual physical pain. But never when it was an open wound had it tortured him as it did now. For Jimmy affected much the society of ladies, and was known to be ambitious of matrimony. But every saucy tongue in the village had wagged with the story of this blue sear. The lady whose hand Jimmy sought should have been encouraged by it ; for it was the standing joke of Bingwell that during a misunderstanding with his sister, Miss Betsy had thrown an old saucepan at her brother, and, as he said, "the crock had got into his nose." It was popularly believed that Betsy had quite vanquished the parish clerk in this en-

counter, and the gossips said Jimmy wanted a wife that he might escape from the cruel care of his unlovely sister.

Mrs. Prickett may or may not have been aware of it, but certainly Jimmy had his eye upon herself. So it was not likely that she would be allowed to pass his garden unnoticed or uninvited. The sight of Mrs. Prickett induced him to make a brief toilet, putting his finger and thumb into his mouth, and then so “bandolining” the “love lock” that underhung his battered hat.

“Nice weather for taturs, mum,” he said, advancing to the garden fence.

Mrs. Prickett had now gained her object, the clerk had called her ; she had not visited him.

Then he asked her to “come in and set down ;” and as Mrs. Prickett’s “legs was tired ” she accepted the invitation.

“ ‘Tain’t like your rooms, mum,” said Jimmy, looking round the slovenly apartment, and making at once an apology and a compliment. If Betsy had not been within earshot Mrs. Prickett would probably have let loose some of the hard words with which she could have characterised the housekeeping of Pitcher’s sister. But the confusion which this enforced reticence occasioned was at once ascribed to quite a wrong cause by the amorous parish clerk.

“ You’re wery lonesome sometimes, I dessay, though you have got everythink so nice about you,” said Jimmy, screwing his

queer little face up into a smile, which was intended to insinuate that he was ready to beguile any spare hours the widow might find tedious.

“Lor bless yer, man, I’ve hardly time to wind up the clock.” And Mrs. Prickett laughed a laugh that straightened Jimmy’s face, and caused the blue scar to show out. “But it wasn’t to talk fiddle-faddle as I was wanting,” she went on; “I’ve seen that there lawyer.”

“Yer hev! And what does he say?”

“Well, he seems to think there’s somethin’ in it.”

“Do he, though?” Mr. Pitcher was pondering over this and thinking how Will’s possible legitimacy would affect his own

position. If her wild foster-son were cleared out of the way, so much the better ; but any further rise in life on the part of Mrs. Prickett would lift her much too far above his reach. Yet on the whole Mr. Pitcher thought his best game was to assist the widow in her inquiries with all his power. Having a lawyer, a real London lawyer, at work upon the case, was in itself a great fact ; he regarded the matter as half over now that Gribble had taken it in hand. “Yer see, mum, that comes o’ people being in orfice ; it was me as that young shaver come to see.”

“I ain’t denying that, Master Pitcher,” replied Mrs. Prickett, a little stiffly, for the clerk was, in her opinion, taking rather too

much credit to himself. She was quite willing to let him work with her, but it wasn't in her nature to be the sleeping partner. "It ain't to you as he looks for the money," she said, tartly. "But how did you become acquainted with him?"

"'Tisn't no oncommon thing with me," replied Pitcher, stretching his little neck, "to have a genelman like that come to me, and say, I want a buth, or a deth, or maybe a weddin'. 'Tis arf-a-crown for the parson, and sometimes they give me a pint, but as orft'n not. This 'ere one—he was a right smart chap with one o' them squizzing glasses—he says, 'Name o' Talboys.' Says I, '*I* ain't put nobody in the yard o'

that name.' Says he, ‘ow many hundred years ha' you bin here, old genelman ?’ So I see at onst he was a goin' a long way up the register.

“ Well, he come orft'n on to the Squire's name ; there was Frankland here, and Frankland there, so he says, ‘These 'ere Franklands are great people about here, I spose,’ and it was that sayin' o' hisn that made me speak up like I did.”

None of all this was very new to Mrs. Prickett, yet it lightened her mind to be talking of the business with the only person in whom she could confide. She asked Pitcher if he had ever searched the parish books himself with a view to finding out anything. “Who knows,” she said, “folks

is so deceitful about these things ; they might ha' been married here."

There was scarcely the smallest probability that the event—if the late Squire had married Amy Campbell—had taken place at Bingwell church ; and Mrs. Prickett knew this, but her anxiety to be doing something for her foster-son made her not so attentive to the arguments against this probability as she was in calmer moments. She persuaded Pitcher to go with her alone to the church that they might make a search together ; and he agreed, after he had, with rustic red-tapery, made as much of the concession as possible, in order to increase his claims upon the widow's regard.

They arranged to go by different paths,

to avoid "making people talk," and were to meet in the porch, or rather, Mrs. Prickett was to be in the porch, and Pitcher would enter by the vestry door and then let the widow into the church by a public door not visible from the houses in the street.

The clerk knew nothing could come of their search, or at least he was almost certain of this, but he liked acting officially with Mrs. Prickett, and Jimmy was not altogether insensible to a sort of clandestine pleasure as he admitted Will's foster-mother to the church.

Ordinarily Mrs. Prickett was the better man of the two; but when she arrived in the vestry the stillness of the place and, as she thought, the lawlessness of the proceeding,

rather overpowered her; and seeing her agitation Jimmy felt himself more and more master of the situation.

“It’s very quiet here, ain’t it ?” said Mrs. Prickett, half in terror, peeping out through the vestry-room door, down the long aisle over the vacant pews.

“We don’t keer about the quiet, nor the ghostes, nor nothin’,” replied Pitcher, proudly.

“Lor bless yer, there’s as many as seven parsons a layin under this blessed room.”

Mrs. Prickett was horrified, but just now Pitcher thumped the heavy register on the table, and they commenced the search together. Jimmy noticed with complacency that the widow’s finger trembled as she ran it down the pages of the book.

"Here they are," she said, after a few minutes' search ; "but it's only the present lady. And if this book speaks all the truth, the old Squire warn't married before. 'John Frankland,'" she read, "'Emma Josephine Curzon,' that's Master Edward's mother, sure enough."

Pitcher then showed her the certificate of Amy Campbell's birth and burial ; the latter bore her maiden name only, and here their ineffectual search came to an end.

But Jimmy was not quite contented that their interview should so terminate. The prize he had in view was certainly not Will's advancement, but his own, and was he more likely to gain it by waiting ? He thought not. And then the situation had

its charm. So he said, with what he thought an irresistible smirk, “Hadn’t us better go about this ’ere job o’ Master Will’s thegither ?”

The widow was evidently about to shatter his hopes at once, but Pitcher had got the start of her and continued,—

“I’ve orft’n and orft’n looked across the church at you, and felt kinder as if you belonged to me ; cos, yer see, Master Prickett he was clerk and beadle afore me, and wore the same coat with the goold on it just the same as I do. And I orft’n says to myself at them times, ‘She must feel werry much the same towards me when she sees me a reading the psalms ;’ now don’t yer, Mrs. Prickett ?”

“ You wicked man, why such a thought never entered my head,—in church time too !”

“ Ain’t it werry natteral,” Jimmy urged, “ as we should pair up ?—ain’t I got his orfice, and his coat, and the seat he used to set in, and ain’t you kinder ’customed to hear me say the hamens and to think it’s him ?”

“ Lor, Master Pitcher, I ain’t never give a thought to yer ;” she didn’t like to tell him, “ he wasn’t man enough for her,” though this unkind and contemptuous speech was on her tongue. But she rose from her chair in the vestry, and, followed by the crestfallen parish clerk, left the church, parting with him at the door.

CHAPTER V.

ISAAC AND ISHMAEL.

“ You will come in and see mamma ? you must,” said Lucy, as she and Edward Frankland rode up to Sir John Denman’s house.

They had met accidentally in the course of an afternoon ride. Friends from childhood, there was an undefined feeling between them which on Edward’s part seemed to be rapidly ripening into love, nor did his attentions appear to be altogether disagreeable to Lucy.

“I have so enjoyed my ride,” she said, as Edward assisted her to dismount.

“And so have I, thanks to our meeting in Rowton Lane.”

“Ladies are exempt from the necessity of giving reasons;” said Lucy, smiling and blushing.

“Not where the happiness of others is concerned,” replied Edward, in a tone which seemed to be unintentionally serious.

However, Lucy was too busy in giving a final pat to her horse’s neck to answer this question, and when this operation was ended, she gathered up her skirts and preceded Edward into the presence of Lady Denman, who was “very glad indeed to see him.” Then turning to her daughter,—

"I'm so sorry you were out, dear ; Lord Nantwich and his sister have been here. Sweet girl Ethel is ! They had ridden over from Dropton, I believe, with no other object——"

"Than to see you, mamma,—so they were gratified. I am not so very grieved to have missed them."

This was a delicious remark to Edward, for Lord Nantwich was the one rival he feared.

"But, dear ! Ethel wanted you to come over to Dropton for some archery, and I think, if decency had permitted, Lord Nantwich would have sat here till you came home ; as it was, he did stay nearly three-quarters of an hour, but you know he is a

good talker, and the time didn't seem long."

"And did you accept, mamma?"

"Well, yes, dear; I saw no other way of dealing with the invitation. So we go on Tuesday, if you like."

It does not follow because Edward saw in this a continuation of what he feared was Lady Denman's matrimonial policy with regard to Lucy and Lord Nantwich, that any one else in the room was occupied with the same thought.

"Did you see that girl Smithson at church last Sunday, Mr. Frankland?" asked Lady Denman, by way of changing the subject of conversation from matters personal to Lucy and herself. "She dresses in excel-

lent taste, I must say, but whoever saw a lady's maid or a barmaid, or whatever she is, give herself such airs? I declare at one moment, when we were leaving the church, I thought she meant to bow to me."

"I think Clara Smithson is a very handsome, clever girl," replied Edward, quietly; "and if she is naturally above her station, I can't say I look upon it as a fault."

"Nor I, mamma. For some reason or other, she seems not to like me, but I think she is very beautiful; I caught a glimpse of her face as we were just now riding past the White Horse, and it reminded me of a picture I have seen somewhere of Lady Macbeth."

"You'll make her out quite a heroine

between you," interrupted Lady Denman: "now I think her a girl of wild, ungovernable, dangerous temper, and not less dangerous because of her undoubted beauty."

"Poor girl, I think she ought not to be living at that public-house: it is a great pity she left Lord Dunkeld's family."

"Well, but Lucy, I hear that it was not her own fault."

"I rather think she prefers doing nothing in the way of work, although that involves residence at the White Horse," said Edward. He was standing, hat in hand, unwilling to leave Lucy's presence, and yet feeling that he could not stay much longer. He held out his hand to Lady Denman, saying,—

“I’m so glad to hear from my mother that you and Miss Denman are coming to our festivities.”

“I regard it both as a great pleasure and a duty ; I’m sorry my husband is detained in London.”

The festivities were in celebration of Edward’s majority, though this had been attained three years before ; but his father’s failing health and then his death had deferred the rejoicings.

“Good-bye, Miss Denman. I count upon opening the ball with you for my partner. May I safely indulge the happy thought ?”

“I suppose I must not refuse such an honour,” replied Lucy, looking down and

blushing ; but wouldn't mamma or some older lady be more correct ? ”

Lady Denman was not inattentive to these remarks. She heard, but not disapprovingly ; indeed she had long resolved that Edward should marry Lucy. She glanced at them and thought them a very handsome couple ; so indeed they were, for Edward, though above the middle height, was well proportioned, and his face always wore an expression which seemed to invite confidence and assure sympathy ; while Lucy, whose graceful figure showed to perfection in her riding-habit, was at the moment holding his hand and looking up to him with an expression of smiling yet nervous deprecation of his proposal, the sunlight shining on her

expressive countenance, lighting up her rich golden-brown hair, seeming to sink deep into her blueish-grey eyes, and to play with loving admiration around her faultless features.

They might not know it themselves, but Lady Denman felt quite sure at this moment that they loved each other.

And so they parted laughingly, Edward resolving as he rode homewards that after the rejoicings were over he would ask Lucy if she loved him and would become his wife.

But his happy thoughts were disturbed as he turned the corner of Rowton's Lane, and saw Will Campbell turn and recognise him. Will was walking in the same direction that

Edward was going, and it was impossible to avoid overtaking him, as Will was slouching but slowly along the road.

Edward was several years Will's junior ; he had always tried to be civil to him without the air of patronage, mindful of the relationship that existed between them, but it was a very difficult *rôle* to sustain, for Will was sullen, haughty, and overbearing, resenting the slightest kindness as an affront, and yet more than suspected of committing depredations which the Franklands were fearful of punishing.

It was the old feud. There was Ishmael in the road and Isaac on horseback : and Ishmael coveted the horse and the belongings of Isaac, while Isaac wanted to retain

these and all his advantages, and yet to make things pleasant with Ishmael.

"Well, Will, there will be a good many birds this year."

"What should I know about birds? That brute of a keeper of yours had the impudence to threaten me the other day, when I was merely looking at 'em."

Will had not removed his hands from the pockets of his velveteen shooting-jacket; but his strong legs, well cased in gaiters and corduroy breeches, seemed to quicken their movement as he made this reply, in order to keep up with Edward's horse. And as he said it he lifted his face to look at Edward. It was a handsome face. There was no sinister expression in his dark brown eyes.

His forehead was broad, and from under his wide-awake there appeared some thick tufts of strong, curling, black hair, of which there was also a bushy plantation under his chin and upon his cheeks. His features were good but weather-marked. He looked the pattern of a strong, active, healthy man.

“ You know, Will, you do make Thompson angry ; I don’t say it’s you, but he thinks it is you who have been killing off those young pheasants, and I must say whoever did that is a fellow that deserves to be punished.”

“ How, if he can’t get at ’em any other road—how then ?”

“ I don’t say it was you, but you know

you might always have a day's rabbit shooting if you asked for it."

"And leave the game for my betters, I s'pose ; that's proper, ain't it ? And go down on my knees to Thompson ? I'll see him damned first, and then I won't."

"You'll get yourself into trouble some day, Will. But I must be off. Good-bye," and Edward cantered homewards.

"Into trouble," muttered Will ; "why, I've never been out of it. It's a good deal easier for you to get into trouble, Master Edward. Perhaps if you wasn't on the high horse she wouldn't care for you."

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. PRICKETT LETS THE CAT OUT OF THE

BAG.

MRS. PRICKETT was busy this afternoon “cleaning up.” She was a bright-eyed, active little woman of an uncertain age, probably between fifty and sixty, but, as she said of herself, “she’d never know’d a day’s illness ; and though the Lord had sent her grey hairs, yet, thank his mercy, her teeth was good, and she’d never wanted for nothink.” Her “keeping-room,” into which the door opened from the garden, showed the results

of Mrs. Prickett's labour, for the bricks of the floor were brightly, newly red, and the piece of carpet which ordinarily lay in front of the fire, was rolled up on the settle until the floor was dry. She had just been polishing three metal platters till they shone like silver, and was making her way across the room, under a beam well hung with hams and cheeks, to replace them above the dresser, on which stood her household gods in the shape of some odds and ends of dinner and tea services of earthenware and china, when Will came in. She looked at him with an anxious and motherly fondness.

“ What's amiss, Will—what makes yer look so sorely ?”

"Oh, I don't know, mother; is the tea ready?" and Will pulled one of the chairs up to the fire, and sat down looking between the bars as if all that he wanted lay there among the red-hot cinders.

"Did yer sell the cow?" asked Mrs. Prickett, with ill-concealed anxiety.

Will hesitated. Then he dived deep into his pocket and produced thirteen sovereigns. He looked at them for a moment, after counting them, and seemed to make a resolve, but not without a struggle.

"I won't tell yer no lies," he said, sullenly, "I sold her for fourteen pound, and then I went and lost a suverin' playing at knock'em downs."

"Drat you men ! if you ain't the most wasteful, spending creechures as the Lord ever made ! There, I wonder why he did make yer. If a woman does try to get a honest crust, yer must needs take it out of her mouth!"

"Well mother, if I'd ha' had a pound about me you shouldn't a know'd of it."

"That I shouldn't, I know, Will," replied Mrs. Prickett, with ready forgiveness ; "yer was always free with yer money, and a open hand is a good deal more to my fancy than a shet one. I wish you was more given to work," she continued ; "and I must say it, Will, less fond o' public houses and them ungodly games,— which they're the evil one's games, who goes about——" Mrs.

Prickett tried to remember the quotation,
“like a stoat in a hen-hus.”

Will sat sulkily looking at the fire, apparently heedless of her remarks,

“I don’t mean to say,” she went on, “but what all has their faults ; but yours never was being unkind to yer mother. And when the Lord was a writin’ the Commandments on the top of Sinai, and he put a promise on to the fifth, it’s my belief that He meant that ere like as though to say that all the others wasn’t nothing to that. But things ’ud go on easier, and you’d be a deal comfort’bler in yer mind, Will, if yer was to give up thinkin’ about that gal o’ Smithson’s, and to try to keep yourself respectable with a good character, because yer .

don't know what may happen one of these days.

Mrs. Prickett was thinking about Mr. Gribble, and speculating upon the possible success of his inquiries. But she had said nothing about her interview with him to Will, although her foster-son well knew that she hoped to see him master of Hever Court.

Yet he turned sharply at her concluding remark. "Ah! mother," he said, and there was a gleam of hope upon his face, "if something was to happen like what you mean, she'd have me then. But it's foolish to go harping on that; it ain't likely that them that's got Hever would let me have it if it was ever so."

"Ay; well, we shall see; I once see'd a lawyer, and he said to me, says he—he was a sarcy kind of a chap—but, says he—I remember his words as plain as if he was a settin' in that chair—'law's all humbug,' says he, 'and a poor man ain't no chance against ready money; but then,' says he, 'a poor man's a rich man if he's got a good case, and he won't want for law, leastways not when Mister Gribble is on the rolls,' he says."

Mrs. Prickett had said enough to make Will very attentive; too much, she feared; she had not intended to disclose the name of her legal adviser, or even to confess that she advised with any lawyer, because she was sensible enough to estimate how small was

the probability of Will's legitimacy, and how hurtful to him was her uncontrollable curiosity upon the subject so long as her endeavours failed to be successful.

"For God's sake, mother! you don't mean to say you've heard anything?"

Now Mrs. Prickett did think that, in taking a lawyer's clerk into her confidence, she had done something very important. Indeed, she regarded this tremendous step in some vague, indistinct manner as the certain prelude to success. Therefore Will's question confused her.

"Well, no, Will; I can't rightly say as I've heerd anythink, but——"

"What?" he exclaimed, with feverish impatience.

“I’m—I’ve—that is, Master Pitcher——”

“What’s Jimmy Pitcher got to do with it ?”

“Why, births and all that are in his way, don’t you see, Will ?”

After some more questioning, Mrs. Prickett was forced to tell Will about her interview with Mr. Gribble, and of his engagement to make search in London for evidence of the marriage of his father and mother. For a moment Will was infected with the sanguine hopefulness of his mother, but this quickly subsided.

“I hope you didn’t give the lawyer-brute any money,” was his first remark ; “it’s a deal worse than spending it at knock-em-downs, if you did.”

"No, I told him sartin sure, and Pitcher was witness, as I wasn't to give him nought nor owe him nought."

"Then you may take your word, he's forgot all about it by this time."

"Well, he may, that's true," and Mrs. Prickett's face visibly lengthened at the thought; "but he was such a active and ready-spoken young man, that I don't think he will. 'Sides," she added, "he axed such knowing questions as to where your mother had lived—whereabouts in London, I mean—and I told him all that the poor thing had told me."

CHAPTER VII.

“ HE LOVES ; HE LOVES ME NOT.”

THERE stood in the window of Mrs. Prickett’s room an ornament, than which no finer could grace the boudoir of a princess. She had given half-a-dozen rabbit-skins for it. But in her keeping it had grown from a slip into a splendid shrub. It was a red camellia, and bore three fine blossoms.

Will had left his chair, and was standing near the window, looking out through the leaves of the camellia, pondering and irresolute, as to what he had heard from his

foster-mother, thinking how it might affect his future fortunes, when his eye fell on the most perfect of these blossoms, and hastily turning to see if Mrs. Prickett was observing him, he snipped it off, and concealed it in one of the huge pockets of his coat.

The old woman had not noticed the larceny.

Then he went up the worm-eaten, creaking staircase, and presently Mrs. Prickett saw him leave the house by the back way, on purpose to avoid her. She well knew where he was going.

“ Ay, poor morth !” she soliloquised; “ he’s a going flyin’ round the candle, and that huzzy won’t care how much he burns hisself, not she.”

Will was certainly taking his way to the White Horse, with the overt intention of drinking a glass or two of ale, but really with the hope of seeing Clara Smithson.

It was Mrs. Smithson who greeted him at the inn-door. She was a double-chinned woman, of inealculable diameter. One-half of her would have been considerably larger than Mrs. Prickett. She was the terror of the curate, Mr. Fipps. “Not that she was an open scoffer,” as that gentleman had once explained, “or in any way improper, but she was not amenable to religious teaching.” The fact is, that Mrs. Smithson laughed at Mr. Fipps. Whatever her religion was, it was not that of the curate. She always

spoke of Mr. Bustard, the rector, with respect; but her merry eyes twinkled, and her mouth wreathed with fun, when she irreverently discoursed of “Little Fipps.”

She liked Will, forgiving his laziness and willing submission to any circumstances that favoured it, because she thought it the consequence of his unfortunate birth. And perhaps the spice of scandal that he carried about with him made him not less agreeable to the hostess of the “White Horse.” It was not her habit to dislike men or things because they were a little incorrect. Yet she herself was a model of cleanliness and good housewifery, and Will knew well enough that she would never let Clara

marry him. But then he knew, also, that Clara would do what pleased herself in this matter, and that her aunt's voice would avail nothing against her will.

She wagged her fat face reproachfully at Will.

“Pity them stocks has gone out o' use, you lazy-bones ; they'd ha' fitted them ankles of yours to a t.”

Will looked down at his ankles, and both laughed heartily.

“ You forget ; I haven't got anybody to work for, Mrs. Smithson.”

“ Ah ! well. 'Tis to be hoped you'll mend your ways. Yes, you may come into the parlour and rest a bit.”

“ Good morning, Miss Clara,” said Will,

glad, and yet not glad, to see her sitting there. There was a languid' ease in her manner, which made her appear so unapproachable to Will. She seemed now to be rather annoyed by the interruption to her reading, for she held in her hand a volume of "Aurora Floyd." Her reception of Will seemed to express a passive readiness to accept the homage which she knew he would offer, and which she would accept, not quite unwillingly, as her due.

Even Will could read all this in her handsome features as she turned towards him, laying her book in her lap, but without moving a neatly-slippered foot from off the fender, and shaking, with a most attractive

gesture, the single curl that lay upon her shoulder.

Nothing could be more easy than her attitude while Will was sitting on the corner of his chair, nervously sipping his ale as an excuse for his silence.

“And *that* man thinks he may marry me,” was Clara’s thought, while Will began to wish he hadn’t plucked the camellia. But she spared him from the difficulty he anticipated in approaching its presentation, by asking—

“Are you going to the dance to-morrow night, Will ?”

“No,” he replied, reddening ; “mother and me never go up there ; but I was sure,” he added, with a glance intended to be

slightly malicious, but failing utterly when it encountered Clara's cool, superior stare, "I was sure you would be going, and I brought you this."

He produced the flower from his pocket.

"I heard you say once, at mother's, that you should like one to put in your hair."

Clara was really pleased.

"How very kind of you, Will. I am only so sorry we shan't have a dance together. It's just the right shade, too, for my hair."

Will was quite happy, and felt that he could brave the scolding he knew he should get from Mrs. Prickett for plucking the flower.

Yet he had a painful suspicion of the cause of Clara's pleasure, though he did not know how entirely it was because this flower would give her another claim to Edward Frankland's favour at the ball which, in honour of his majority, was to come off the next evening. It had no other value in her eyes, except as she thought it might, by enhancing her charms, diminish the effect of those quiet graces for the possession of which she felt she hated, while she envied Lucy Denman.

"I'm so much obliged, Will," she said, as he rose to go.

"It ain't half good enough for you. I wish, Miss Clara," added Will, in a burst, "I'd something so good to offer you that

you'd take me with it." And Will's dark eyes rested with an eager look upon her face.

"And if you were ever so rich it isn't me you would bring flowers to, Master Will," she said, with a smile, little embarrassed ; "but here comes aunt."

The entry of Mrs. Smithson choked the protestations Will was about to make, and he was glad to leave before she had seen and questioned about the flower he had brought for Clara.

But his happiness was of short duration, for at the door he met Edward, who nodded at him, and passed, with the liberty of a favoured patron, into Mrs. Smithson's parlour.

“Come to engage you for the first waltz, Mrs. Smithson,” he said, laughing, bowing at the same time to Clara, who blushed and glanced hastily at the camellia, wishing it would disappear under her sight.

“Lor! Master Edward. I know better than to get my best cap tore by the young ’uns. They’d think I was going to run off with you.” And Mrs. Smithson shook the parlour with her laughter.

Edward gave her some directions about supplying refreshments for the labourers on the estate, whose feast was to be provided from the White Horse. Then, with a gay, courteous smile, he addressed Clara,—

“And I should have all the young men in

the village against me, Miss Smithson, if I asked the same privilege of you."

Clara tossed her head disdainfully.

"What do I care for all the young men in the village?"

"No; all I said was, that they care for you; and if you wear that flower in your hair"—Edward pointed to the camellia—"you will be quite irresistible."

Clara's lip curled scornfully, and Edward, thinking that "he never could make out that girl," bade them good morning.

He didn't know that her eyes followed him, expressing petulant anger, and yet with it a longing that he would turn, if it were only on the threshold, that she might see his face again.

She was biting her red lips with vexation.

"He fancies I care what these louts think of me." Then, glad to escape from her aunt, she ran up-stairs, and watched Edward from her window as he walked homewards by the field-path.

Had he been vain, perhaps her feelings might have betrayed her before this ; he would have had some excuse for being conceited could he have seen this handsome, proud girl struggling to hide even from herself a tear as she pressed his portrait to her lips, or rather the ruin of it, which, in the passing of her fit of passion, she had again treasured.

It had cost her no little shame and trouble to get this wretched caricature of his

face from the travelling photographer, who, after taking portraits at Hever Court, had exhibited the negatives at the White Horse.

CHAPTER VIII.

HEVER COURT “EN FÊTE.”

HEVER COURT had been all day *en fête*. Even Mr. Fipps had become hilarious. He had taken upon himself the duties of a swing, and had swung all comers till his arms ached. But all his Sunday scholars were candidates for the seat, and would not dispense with his services, though he looked sometimes rather longingly to where Lucy Denman was seated on the grass, surrounded by a little crowd playing a quieter game. The bigger boys had run races and jumped

and climbed, with Edward for master of the ceremonies; and Mrs. Frankland, surrounded by her friends, had given the prizes to the winners according to his award.

Adjoining the house, a large square tent had been erected, in which a tremendous dinner had been eaten at midday. Edward had made two or three speeches, one for the Queen, another for himself, and a third for his mother, which everybody cheered, and now the evening had come and the dinner-tables had disappeared, the floor of the tent looked straight and clean, and the company were assembling for the dance which was to conclude this festive day.

Now and then from the platform on which

the musicians were stationed there came the sound of tuning, the squeaking of the fiddle-screws, and occasionally the thrum-thrum of a harp.

They were awaiting the “house party” to open the ball. Among the company already assembled Mrs. Smithson loomed large in a satin dress of that indescribable brownish green colour which is so favoured by women of her size and class. She might well look proud of the handsome girl at her side, though it was evident that Clara didn’t return the compliment. Clara seemed of quite a different class to the rest of the company. Fortunately for her, there had been little difference in size between her late mistress, Lady Anne Dunkeld, and

herself, and the dress she now wore had made its first appearance in very high society. It was of some white material, thin and gauzy, with here and there bunches of red ribbons, quite in keeping with Will's camellia, which lay nestling in her black hair. Mrs. Smithson was greeting every one she came near, but Clara scarcely deigned to take any notice of those to whom her aunt spoke. They had just reached a seat, when "the gentlefolks" were heard approaching.

"No, thanks, I don't dance," said Lady Denman, withdrawing her hand from Edward's arm.

They were followed by his mother and Mr. Bustard, the rector, who looked so comfortable that, apart from the impropriety,

no one would have thought of asking him to dance.

Edward would have liked to claim Lucy from Lord Nantwich, who led her into the room, or at least Nantwich's pretty sister, Lady Ethel Morley, who followed, charitably engaged in drawing out Mr. Fipps, spite of a sort of professional horror of the revels he was about to witness.

But the voice of duty told Edward he must open the ball with the wife of the most considerable of his tenants. She was a Mrs. Strawson, and pranced through her part with evident satisfaction, affording great amusement to Nantwich, who, when Lucy accepted the invitation of some young farmer, had selected Clara for his first partner.

For the next dance Lucy was engaged to Nantwich. Edward could scarcely repress the look of annoyance with which he heard it. She seemed not to wish to dance with him. He felt he loved her so much that he thought he had a right to monopolise her, especially this evening. He rather desired to show all his neighbours and tenants that she was the lady of his choice. Probably this was the reason that made Lucy hold back. But he was troubled with the thought that she preferred Nantwich, and he was not quite happy as he led out Clara for the waltz.

Edward could not keep his eyes from Lucy and Nantwich, who were already gliding

with easy grace through the dancers. He could see Lucy's strained attention to catch the remarks which Nantwich in his usual quiet cynical manner was dropping into her ear.

Lord Nantwich was not a handsome man, at least it was often remarked, not until you had known him for some time. Yet there seemed an immense reserve of strength in his impassive face. But for his good breeding he would have looked a coarse man ; as it was, even his strong features, his smooth but mobile countenance, his well-knit, though somewhat broad frame, and his stiff, straight brown hair, had nothing of a *bourgeois* appearance.

“Don't you think, Miss Denman,” he was

saying, “there’s a great deal of hypocrisy about this sort of thing?”

“About what? I don’t understand you.”

“These rejoicings, as they call them; what’s the proper thing to say?—‘mixture of all classes,’ I think that is the proper phrase.”

“Does the condescension annoy you?”

“Not a bit, but I trembled just now to see you in the hands of that clodhopper.”

“He was very nice, and his politeness was very sincere.”

“But might I suggest he would have been happier with his Molly.”

“Doubtless,” answered Lucy, laughing, “but then he couldn’t have studied deportment as exhibited by Lord Nantwich.”

"Well, if you think we are elevating the masses I withdraw my objection, especially as I am perfectly happy at present; but may I ask you for the next dance?"

"Certainly not, I am engaged to that young man near the window, with the high collar and shining hair."

"I declare it's wicked, Miss Denman." Lucy laughed and blushed as she regained her seat, and told Nantwich "to go and do his duty."

Meanwhile Clara had detected the wandering glances of her partner, but she did not resent them against Edward, her feeling was one of increased hatred towards Lucy.

"If I can separate them!" was Clara's thought.

"Your last partner was the best dancer in the room," said Edward.

Her eyes were modestly cast down as he spoke. Then she looked up with just one glance expressing glad preference for him, and felt that she had pleased him as they began to dance.

"I think Lord Nantwich is very haughty," she said, timidly.

"Why?" Edward increased his condescension. "He was not so to you, I'm sure."

Clara smiled, as though she cared little if he were so.

"He is going to be married to Miss Denman, isn't he?" she asked, in the most innocent and unconcerned voice.

She felt the thrill, though, which her question sent through Edward, extending even to his arm which encircled her waist.

"No!" he replied, with faint emphasis, "I never heard so," yet she read in his face an evident annoyance that he should be disturbed by a question put by so incompetent a person. This nerved her to cut deeper into his heart.

"I thought it was settled," she said, carelessly.

Edward strove for a moment to appear uninterested, but it was a failure.

"Who told you such nonsense?" They had finished dancing, and he spoke angrily, looking into her face for an answer. But her eyes met his with a lurking smile, which

told him he had betrayed his love for Lucy, and made him feel a momentary sense of Clara's superiority to himself. Not a word had been said to give him such a thought, yet he was certainly conscious of being to some extent in her power. It was the natural triumph of a stronger over a weaker character in a moment of perplexity.

"I don't clearly recollect," she replied ; "it may have been, yes, I think it must have been Lady Anne Dunkeld ; you know they are cousins."

"I suppose all women love titles," he said, bitterly, and then directly felt ashamed of himself for allowing such an expression to pass his lips with regard to Lucy.

"Not all," Clara's voice here was low and

soft. "I am only a poor girl, but if I marry it will be for love."

Edward made no reply, yet there was something soothing and sweet to his ear in the remark. It seemed for a moment to heal his wounded heart.

Clara perceived this, she felt that there was something like a confidence re-established between them.

And when Edward afterwards danced with Lucy she found him silent, dull, and pre-occupied.

CHAPTER IX.

CLARA FINDS MATTER FOR REFLECTION.

YET Clara on her part was not satisfied when the ball was over. She had been far from successful in detaining Edward. When the notes of the National Anthem warned the most reluctant dancers that they would be piped to no longer, it was not he who came forward to get her shawl, or pay her any attention. Just before she left the ball-room, she had the misery of seeing him deep in conversation with Lucy, and appa-

rently quite reconciled to her whom Clara regarded as her rival.

A gawky young farmer wished to be useful to Clara, and tried to assist in adjusting her wrappers, but she repulsed him so rudely, that Mrs. Smithson, who stood by, was quite shocked, and as for the farmer, he withdrew frightened, and resolving never again to make up to Clara.

She and her aunt walked together from the door of Hever Court without speaking a word. But this silence was not at all to the mind of Mrs. Smithson, who was infected by the gaiety of the evening, and perhaps not altogether unaffected by the wine she had taken rather freely. But few of the company being “carriage people,” the guests

mostly walked to their homes in groups, and the stout hostess was by no means sorry to be overtaken by a neighbour who would beguile the way with talk.

Clara's white dress shewed conspicuous in the dark night. Between them and the lodge-gates lay a large plantation, which, indeed, almost belted the park. Through this wood the road lay between tall trees, which completely hid it from the moonlight. And when they had advanced but a few yards in this gloomy shade, Clara was startled to see the dark motionless figure of a man quite close to her. She thought that most probably it was one of the game-keepers, perhaps Thompson, whom she knew very well.

Then she recognised Will Campbell.

"I thought it was you,—I was waiting for you," said Will.

"Waiting for me?" Clara replied, astonished. In her present frame of mind she was by no means displeased to meet with him. But Will did not know the extent of his good fortune. Tortured with jealousy and hatred, he had found it impossible to go to bed, and had turned out for a walk into the park, lurking under shadow of this wood, hoping to meet with Clara. Yet he felt sure he should meet her radiant with triumph, caring less than ever for himself. Even in the night-light he could see how very beautiful she looked in her ball costume. Her hair was dressed with so much

more elegance and care than usual, and in the surprise of the greeting she had let go the wrapper which covered her bare neck and shoulders, so that Will caught a delicious glimpse of charms which only her ball dress exposed.

Nor was her aunt altogether sorry. She made some laughing remark to Will "that he was a faithful old dog," and without regret saw that Clara meant to accept his escort homewards. For so far Clara had been a damper upon Mrs. Smithson's spirits. She couldn't let herself out in neighbourly talk while her handsome niece, of whom all the village gossips were afraid, stalked sullenly and silently by her side.

Clara allowed her aunt and her friend to precede herself by some steps, and then the enraptured Will felt her hand laid in his arm, and in this position of unaccustomed favour he and Clara continued their walk through the wood.

“There is no one else, no other man would do this for me,” she said, slightly pressing his arm.

“There isn’t another that loves you as I do,” was Will’s reply.

“How do you know that?”

“They can’t, and what’s more, they shan’t.”

“And pray why not?” Clara spoke in a cool tone of banter. She was gratified to clear the trouble from her own bosom by

troubling this man's heart. "How do you know Lord Nantwich does not love me, or Mr. Edward? both of them danced with me to-night."

"Damn them," Will muttered.

"No, no, don't swear," and she softly pressed her fingers closer upon his arm, knowingly and wilfully increasing the passionate torment the man was suffering.

"I s'pose if I was up there, if I was Squire, and give treats, you'd have me?"

"You wouldn't think about me then, Will; but I confess it would be nice to live in those fine rooms, and to order all those servants about. Yes, I think I would have you, Will, if you were in Mr. Edward's shoes—and were to ask me."

Should he say anything to her about his newly-raised hopes? He had solemnly promised his foster-mother that he would not speak of them to anybody. But the temptation was too great for his power of resistance. To get Never Court was to get Clara. He could forgive himself for the weakness of being false to his promise by assuring himself that it was best to go towards both by even steps. So, perhaps, he might win together the luxury of wealth, and the possession of this woman.

With the temptation offered by Clara's speech all this rushed through his mind, and made him say,—

“ ‘Tain’t altogether impossible.”

Clara well knew the circumstances of his birth, and had heard of the hopes that Mrs. Prickett entertained of his legitimacy. But Will had never before alluded to these with anything like confidence. She saw now plainly enough by his tone that some new foundation had been discovered ; she pressed his arm closer to herself, and coaxed him with questions which in vain he tried to parry. They were not very much further on the road home before Clara knew that steps were being taken to prove his legitimacy and right to Hever Court. Will's imperfect statement led her to infer that the prospect of success was much more definite than it really was. From what he said she gathered that it was not at all

probable Mr. Gribble's search would prove unsuccessful.

The intelligence revealed quite a new situation to herself. Her first glad thought was that Edward, no longer master of Hever Court, would be more accessible to her love ; perhaps then Lucy would refuse him, or happier than that, perhaps Lucy would still long for him, but her parents would prevent their marriage, and she herself might marry Edward and hurt Lucy. She was silent for a little while after she had gleaned from Will all that he could or would tell her. She had received so much food for thought. Then if Edward would not love her, if he treated her as he had treated her to-night, paying no heed to her whatever, how

glorious a revenge she might have by taking Will—if he succeeded in turning Edward out of doors.

“ You’re thinking about *him*, ” said Will, sulkily.

“ No I am not,” and again she pressed his arm ; “ why should I think of him ; he doesn’t come out in the cold night to meet me, or take any trouble to see me safely home.”

“ Will you marry me if I get up there ? ” Will nodded his head backwards in the direction of Hever Court.

“ I think so,” replied Clara, coyly ; “ but I mustn’t promise, because, you know, you might like some greater lady then.”

“ No, no,” he said passionately, and

taking his arm from her, attempted at her waist, but Clara was not disposed to give him any such privilege, at all events until he approached much more nearly to possession of the Frankland property.

"I shall call my aunt, if you don't walk quietly and behave yourself; there, I'll take your arm again." And she did so with a quietude which betokened very little need of any other protection than her own.

"There was a Miss Denman—Miss Lucy Denman—at the ball; do you know her?" Clara tried to affect carelessness in putting the question.

"Oh, yes, I know her—a very pooty gal. I see what you are driving at. He's going to marry her, they say."

“Really, is that so?” Clara clenched her teeth, to prevent herself from showing how she felt Will’s remark.

“Everybody but *you* knows it.” Will’s emphasis of her own peculiar ignorance of Edward’s matrimonial intentions hit her very hard.

“And *I* don’t believe it,” she replied, as proudly as though the wedding could not by any possibility take place without her sanction.

“Are the Denmans rich?” asked Clara, after a pause which both felt to be very disagreeable.

“Not a bit of it; church mice ain’t poorer. The old man, he’s never at home now; they say he’s making money up in

London, but I don't believe it. I know he was very hard on young Arthur whenever he wanted money."

"You think they are poor," said Clara, eagerly, "and that they want this match because Mr. Edward is rich."

"I'm sure of it," said Will. "Why, there isn't a house meaner kept in the country than Thistlewood, and only lately they've turned off two of their keepers. I know that——"

"Ah, you naughty man. I've heard of your doings at night in the woods. I believe you came out poaching to-night, and laid your gun down when you saw us coming. Now didn't you?"

Will protested he had come for no pur-

pose but to meet her, yet Clara's reproof was so arch, and so plainly implied that she regarded poaching as not altogether the reverse of heroic, that Will admitted he had some nocturnal familiarity with the Thistlewood coverts.

"Then I suppose she would drop him if he lost all this property?"

"If she didn't she'd be made to, I think," replied Will. "But you'll promise you won't say a word of what I've told you to-night."

"Not a word, I promise you. But look here, Will, when you are William Frankland, Esquire, of Hever Court, don't you forget that I was the first to wish you success. Be quiet, will you," she said,

repressing another threatened embrace, "my aunt will see you. Now shake hands. Good night." So she left him in the road before her aunt's house.

CHAPTER X.

A TRIAL WITH CLOSED DOORS.

I THINK Mr. Pitcher believed in his inmost heart that there was a special heaven for parish clerks ; that they were the real elect of the congregations. I think he had a vague idea that they would be for ever fuglemen in everlasting divine services. But he had some doubt as to whether there would be beadlees in a better world. He held both offices, and among the advantages of this world he regarded one of the chief to be the privilege of wearing the golden-braided coat

of office in Bingwell church ; yet it was clearly a terrestrial function, because among the recollections of his boyhood were two former unregenerate wearers of this identical robe. He spoke with the drawling indistinctness of a Hertfordshire peasant, and his ecclesiastical utterances were always prefaced by a long-drawn “y-a-h,” which served to raise his voice. During the reading of “the lessons,” and the delivery of the sermon —at which times he seemed to intimate that he might venture to leave the parson without danger to the congregation—he would sally out from his box, with about two feet of willow switch in his hand, for the punishment of evil-doers and the repression of drowsiness and ease among the Sunday-school children.

If he caught an urchin in a state of somnolency, lulled, perhaps, by the sing-song pomposity of Mr. Bustard, he wasn't to be balked of his prey by the hurriedly awakening pinch of a kindly little neighbour. No, he was the personification of justice, and couldn't pardon such wrong-doing. Perhaps he thought the Thirty-Nine Articles would have been in danger if he had. Down came his stick upon the little knuckles. Now and then a sharp boy would draw his hand quickly, and then Mr. Pitcher's switch made a scandalous noise on the wooden seat. This, however, was only one of the painful contingencies of justice: but if the offender blubbered loudly, then Mr. Pitcher became majestic, and seizing the little criminal by

his garments at the neck—because this was the orthodox mode of handling murderers, and burglars, and all such dangerous characters—hurried him out of church “boo-whooing” down the long aisle. And when he had this wicked goat divided from his sheep by the heavy church-doors, he not unfrequently dismissed him into the outer world with some spiritual warning, compared with which the fire and brimstone of the rector was not terrific.

Mr. Pitcher had shaken the church teaching out of many a boy in whom, but for him and the system of which he was the type, it might have produced the fruit of a happier and better life. Still he had faith in himself, and Mrs. Prickett had faith in him ; indeed

the only shade that had clouded Mr. Pitcher's life had been his refusal by Mrs. Prickett. But though Mrs. Prickett respected the parish clerk as a friend, and as a pillar of the church, yet she felt independence was even a greater privilege than the hand of Mr. Pitcher. And although Will was no longer an infant, yet she foresaw the possibility of a time coming when Mr. Pitcher might embarrass her relations with her adopted son.

But now Mr. Pitcher was hastening through the village, bound for Mrs. Prickett's cottage with so much unusual haste that it betokened an important summons.

Such was the case. Mrs. Prickett's boy-of-all-work had just called at the clerk's house and delivered a message to the effect

that, "Missus wanted to see him theractly ; he'd know what it was for if he wur to tell him that that gent from Lunnun had called on she."

Mr. Pitcher was not disappointed, for before he entered the cottage he saw Mr. Gribble sitting on a corner of Mrs. Prickett's table.

"Well, old gent," he said, when he saw the parish clerk enter, "here we are again." And Mr. Gribble recommenced sucking his walking-cane.

Will sat on one side of the fire in a moody silence, and Mrs. Prickett on the other.

"Lor, Pitcher!" she said, jumping up, "I'm so glad yer come. This gentleman

and I have been a talking till I feel quite dazy like. So I ses I won't say another word, says I, till Pitcher and me's heerd it all over agin together; 'cos yer want witnesses with lawyers, don't yer?"

"Of course yer do," replied Pitcher, solemnly.

Will made an impatient movement, but Gribble checked him.

"Witnesses," the lawyer laughed; "now then, we'll do it in style. Here, old fellow!" and he drew the clerk by his coat-tails to the table. "You sit there; you shall be the judge. Now you, Mr. Will, you be jury; and you, ma'am, you're to be the witness. Thank'ee, Mr. Will; that's quite right, to draw the blind down; you can't be too

quiet in these cases, that you can't. Do you hear, Mr. Pitcher?"

"This ere's a pretty caper!" said the judge, sitting uneasily on the table.

"Silence! my lud, if you please." And Gribble assumed the solemnity of office.

"You ain't up to no larks?" suggested Pitcher.

"If you were not the judge I'd have you turned out of court." Gribble was rather pleased with the effect of his joke, for he saw that the mock tribunal had affected the simple minds of his audience, and he felt that he should more easily discover all they knew upon the subject of his visit.

"Now, ma'am," he turned to Mrs. Prickett,

who sat leaning back in her chair—her face puckered with a sense of self-importance, “the evidence which you shall give before the court and jury, between our sovereign lady the Queen and Mr. Edward Frankland, touching the rights of the gentlemen of the jury, shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. Your name is Mary Prickett ?”

“ ‘Tis Betsy,” said the parish clerk, brightening up.

“ Thank ‘ee, m’ lud.”

“ Did you know the late Mr. Frankland, Mrs. Prickett ?”

“ For more ’an seven years.”

“ And his name was John Frankland ?”

“ Yes.”

“Did you know Miss Amy Campbell?”

“Yes, sure.”

“What year did she run off with the old Squire?”

“In the summer of '28.”

“How do you know it was Mr. Frankland that took her away?”

Mrs. Prickett looked puzzled.

“Cos I see the letter from her to her feyther,” broke in the clerk.

“Oh! you saw the letter, m' lud, did you?—ve-ry well.”

“Now, ma'am, you were with this poor woman when she died; will you tell us what passed between you?”

“Ay, poor dear, she was a sweet, pootty gel; and after her trouble was over and she

was a layin' with that there blessed baby," pointing to Will, whose downcast face seemed inattentive to the entire proceeding, "and with never a mite o' ring on her finger, nor no lines to show, she says to me, as mild as milk, she says, 'Mrs. Prickett, you're a good woman.' Says I, 'My dear, I'm what the Lord made me.' I could see she was a dyin' fast. She turned her head a one side and the tears was running down her cheeks. I see what she was thinkin' of, and I ses, 'I'll be a mother to him, my dear.' And the poor young thing's eyes brightened up as if all her troubles was gone. And she ses, quite low, 'God—bless—yer,' and then there was a kind of a flush come over her face, and she whispered, 'Under—my—'

pillow—for—him. I—did—love—him so.' And then it all went away, and her face come white and bright like a hangel's, and—yes, I allays will say it, Mr. Pitcher,—she went straight away to heaven."

" You never tould me what was under her piller," said the clerk, reproachfully.

" No, Pitcher, I didn't; I've been afeerd to tell anybody till this werry hour."

" Well now, what did you find ?" asked Gribble.

" I found a ring, but it warn't a weddin' ring, in a bit o' paper, and that paper was directed to John Frankland, Esquire, and on it was wrote : 'For the wrong you did his mother, do justice to our son. Your loving Amy.' "

"And you've still that in your possession ?" Gribble put the question eagerly.

"The trouble it's been to me, the Lord only knows. But if you'd ha' seen what a sweet babe it was, and then you know no one heerd a word o' Squire Frankland not for years afterwards, not till he came back married to my lady up at the Court. And that's just where it was, the boy growed so pootty that I couldn't bear the thought of partin' with him, and the Squire brought a wife home with him, and once, when he did speak to me about the boy, we had words about him ; and then you know how sudden the Squire died."

"Now I'll get into the box," interrupted Gribble.

“Please, m’ lud, my name’s Thomas Gribble. I’m an attorney - at - law, and managing clerk for Messrs. Surecharge and Stamps. At the instance of my clients, Mrs. Prickett and Mr. Pitcher—”

Both made a movement of objection, but relapsed on a sign from Mr. Gribble’s hand.

“We ain’t got to pay yer nothin’,” interrupted Mrs. Prickett. But Mr. Gribble took no heed, and proceeded :

“—I made inquiries in the parishes of West-end district for a certificate of the marriage of John Frankland and Amy Campbell, and I produce the certificate of the marriage of those parties. The year is that mentioned by Mrs. Prickett. I have compared the signature with those of the

parties, in one case by inspection of the late Mr. Frankland's will, and in that of the lady with the signature of a letter addressed to her father, which was given in by Mrs. Prickett. I must confess—as I believe your ludship means to ask what I think of this point—that there is but little similarity in the writing of either party. But this appears to me to be immaterial, and admits of easy explanation. For nothing is more likely, gentlemen of the jury, than that the parties to a secret marriage would attempt to disguise their handwriting. The witnesses I have traced to their addresses, but both have disappeared, and it is thought they are emigrated or dead. They were people of humble station in life. Neither

the clergyman, nor the parish clerk in whose presence they were married, have the slightest recollection of the appearance of the parties.

“Upon these facts I rely, and I claim your verdict, gentlemen of the jury, for the plaintiff, Mr. William Campbell, or, I should say—I trust your verdict will enable me rightfully to say—Mr. William Frankland, of Hever Court.”

There was silence when Mr. Gribble ceased speaking.

Will was trying to grasp the possibility of his good fortune, but couldn’t fancy himself master of Hever Court ; his mind ran round and round on the one thought—“What would Clara think of it ?”

Mrs. Prickett looked triumphant, while the clerk, still seated on the table, was troubled with the reflection that he had not enjoyed her entire confidence, and he was thinking too of Will in the Squire's pew—a view which did not altogether please him.

"But you ain't there yet," resumed Mr. Gribble; "yet if this good lady will give me the note and the ring she referred to, and if you," addressing Will, "will sign this small agreement, Thomas Gribble will put you there before the year's out."

"Her own handwriting without a doubt," exclaimed Mr. Gribble, when Mrs. Prickett produced the note. The agreement bound Will to pay Thomas Gribble, Esq., the sum of one thousand pounds upon obtaining pos-

session of the Hever Court estate, the same to be in addition to his professional charges and costs in the matter.

Without much hesitation Will signed the agreement, Mrs. Prickett and Pitcher being witnesses. The lawyer carefully buttoned his coat over it, and promising that they should hear from him soon, set out on his return to London.

CHAPTER XI.

LUCY HAS TWO ADMIRERS AND AN OVERTHROW.

As a matter of fact Mrs. Frankland was not anxious that Edward should marry. She was not averse to marriage as an institution ; but she liked to reign at Hever Court. Mrs. Frankland was frequently spoken of as an elegant person. In days gone by she had been a beauty. But she was frivolous and weak-minded, and the establishment of a younger Mrs. Frankland would have been a death-blow to her happi-

ness. She never admitted this even to herself. She argued that Edward ought to marry, and that she would wish him to marry—if he chose rightly. She had observed his preference for Lucy Denman, and convinced herself, with selfish facility, that he might do better. And being thus convinced, she lost no opportunity of impressing her opinion upon her son.

Mrs. Frankland felt that Edward had made this preference so obvious at the ball, that there was no time to lose if she wished to stop a proposal from him to Lucy.

But she had had no suitable opportunity for approaching the subject for some time afterwards, until one day when her son lounged into the drawing-room after lun-

cheon. He had been shooting during the morning, and seemed wearied. Perhaps this encouraged Mrs. Frankland.

“Edward, dear,” she began ; “have you been over to Dropton since the ball ?”

“No, mother,” he replied, lazily, without lowering the newspaper he was reading from before his eyes.

“I really think you should do so.”

“For heaven’s sake, why, mother ?” asked Edward, testily ; “I am not so very fond of Nantwich.”

“Your inattention to Ethel Morley was so—so unlike yourself.”

“I’m sure it was quite unintentional,” said Edward, twirling his moustache, with a look of vexation.

“ But the *amende* is not the less due. It should not have been owing to such a sweet girl as Ethel.” There was a just sufficient tone of reproach in Mrs. Frankland’s remark to produce the desired feeling of shame in Edward, who began to feel quite angry with himself for a rudeness which he was previously ignorant he had committed.

“ You don’t think I was really rude, mother ?”

“ Well, dear, you might have given less evidence of your preference for Lucy ; it would have been better taste, I think.”

Edward reddened, but fortunately for him his back was towards his mother.

“ Ethel is a very handsome girl, and all

that, but she's rather too much of a fine lady for me."

"He will be a very fortunate man who marries her."

"I don't deny it, mother. He'll have a handsome wife, and I suppose a handsome *dot* with her, *voilà tout*."

"And are you in a position to despise those advantages?"

"Not exactly; but—she's incapable of love."

"Stuff! No woman is incapable of love."

"Well then, mother, she's incapable of loving a second-rate commoner like myself."

"You are too modest. A Frankland of Hever might easily deserve a peerage."

“Baron Frankland of Hever!” laughed Edward. “Really, mother, I’d rather not.”

“It won’t be thrown at you,” replied Mrs. Frankland, peevishly. “I must say, however, that I think you don’t appreciate Ethel Morley. Apart from their difference in social position, I don’t think Lucy is to be compared with her. She has no style, and Ethel is far more lovely.”

“Mother!”

“Well, dear, I cannot for the life of me see what you find to admire in Lucy Denman.”

“You don’t know her, or you would not say so.”

“And then her mother is such an odious, intriguing person!”

“She did not choose her mother.”

“There is that disgraceful affair hanging over them, though Lady Denman does shut the closet so tightly on the family skeleton.”

“And have we no family scandal?” demanded Edward, impatiently. “If Lucy had a scapegrace brother, is that more shameful than Will Campbell’s existence is to ourselves? But forgive me, mother; I only meant that we could not afford to throw stones.”

Mrs. Frankland said no more. She was not really anxious that her son should marry Lady Ethel Morley, but she feared Lucy’s intrusion into her kingdom at Hever Court. She felt she had not gained anything by her remonstrance. Indeed, she perceived

that her son's avowal—for it amounted to that—of his love for Lucy would make him bolder in his suit. But she trusted something would intervene to interrupt the course of his love.

A few minutes afterwards Lady Denman and Lucy were announced. Mrs. Frankland could not but regard this inopportune visit, as she thought it, a bad omen for her hopes.

While the two elder ladies talked together, Edward and Lucy strayed to a window.

"I feared our horses would have run away just now," said Lucy. "It was quite as much as Rayner could do to hold them."

"I can't be angry with them for bringing

you quickly," replied Edward. "I hope they will behave well in returning."

"How we shall manage with them in London I don't know. We are going up to town some time in next week."

"And Bingwell endures a total eclipse of its sun."

"I thought the sun was masculine."

"Well, I mean it will seem very dark when you are gone."

Lucy blushed. Perhaps she felt conscious of the fact that nothing but the presence of the mammas restrained Edward from a more definite expression of his feelings.

"The sun is certainly on us now," she said, hiding her embarrassment. "Shall we leave this window?"

Edward was not very willing to move.

“But see, mamma is going.”

“I was wishing I was a lotos-eater or something, in a land where ‘it was always afternoon.’”

“We must take it as it comes, must we not?” And Lucy smiled sweetly, lifting her eyes and looking frankly in his face as she held out her hand.

“Must we?” asked Edward, with earnest but subdued emphasis, as he took and held her hand. “May we not choose for ourselves?”

But Mrs. Frankland interposed in time to save Lucy from the necessity of reply, and also to witness the blush which Edward’s question and his rather prolonged

hold of her hand had called to Lucy's cheek.

"I was asking Lady Denman, Lucy," she said, "if you would like to have our carriage, as your horses are restive?"

But neither Lucy nor her mother would hear of this, and entered their carriage, which was open, assuring Edward that the horses would certainly go quietly homewards.

These hopes were, however, to be disappointed. The horses were trotting briskly through a narrow lane, hedged by thick underwood, when the sudden report of a gun, fired close by, startled them into a full gallop, a very few strides of which assured Rayner that they were no longer under his control.

At the same moment Will Campbell, who had fired the gun, hearing a scream from Lady Denman, jumped from the hedge, and stood in the roadway watching the carriage. Within two hundred yards of where he stood, at the junction of another lane, lay a heap of stones for the repair of the road.

The horses flew along towards this point, the carriage swaying from side to side in a most terrifying manner. Their way homewards lay round the corner.

“By God, I thought they would,” muttered Will, as he commenced running towards the point.

The horses, making an attempt to round the corner, had drawn the wheels of the carriage, on the side on which Lucy was

sitting, over the heap of stones. The coachman clung to his seat, and Lady Denman lay huddled up in the hood, but Lucy was thrown out upon the road and lay there motionless. When Will came up to where she was lying, the carriage had passed out of sight.

He felt a momentary impulse to run away, fearing that the accident would be attributed to himself. His second thought was inspired by Lucy's beauty. He lifted her on to the grass by the side of the road, and dipping his hat full of water from a brook, began to bathe her face.

"She can't be dead," he said to himself, "there'd be blood somewhere if she was dead." The exquisite refinement of her

features seemed even more apparent in their paleness. Her hat had fallen off, and her rich brown hair lay somewhat disordered about her head. Will felt awed by her loveliness, with a deepening anxiety for her recovery, and so absorbed did he become in this that he was quite forgetful of himself.

At length to his delight Lucy opened her eyes and looked wonderingly at him. He was beginning to make some explanation or apology, when they closed as she fainted again.

Then he took her up in his strong arms, and laying her head gently over his shoulder, walked at a quick pace towards her home.

He could feel her heart beating against

his own, his arm was round her, and his imagination rioting in the recollection of her delicate beauty as she lay inanimate before him. He was faithless to his love for Clara at this moment. Coarse and strong in its passion, yet weak in its fidelity as his nature was, he was now thinking of Edward with hot anger, because he believed him to be Lucy's lover ; then a joyous feeling came over him as he looked forward to Edward's dispossession by himself. Perhaps Lucy's affections would be transferred to himself when he was master of Hever Court. He had no doubt that then she would prefer him to Edward. He pressed her closer to him as he thought this.

But now he was met by a pony carriage

driving rapidly in search of Lucy. Lady Denman had arrived unhurt but sadly frightened. As Will laid Lucy in the carriage he saw she had regained her senses. She was murmuring her thanks when the carriage drove off and left Will standing in the road, looking after it with longing eyes and beating heart.

CHAPTER XII.

IN WHICH WILL PRODUCES A SENSATION.

THE Bingwell “fly” was an institution of the village. Commonly it mouldered and rusted in a back shed at the White Horse. At rare intervals Tom the ostler was ordered with it to the railway-station, or now and then what he called a “night job” occurred. But he assumed no post-boy airs when he harnessed the poor old hack in the stables, and putting on his black-sleeved waistcoat, coaxed “the old hoss” into its swinging tedious trot. With a pretentious air of

mystery and self-importance Will had looked in at the White Horse one morning, about a week after Lucy's accident, and had ordered the fly to meet Mr. Gribble at the Bingwell station.

Mrs. Smithson couldn't get a word of explanation from Will. Clara was not visible. But her aunt could see that Will was excited, and that something very unusual and important was about to happen to him. "Are *you* goin' to ride in the shay?" she asked. "No, he wasn't goin' to ride in the shay. He was goin' back to his mother's." "I dessay it's Lord Farmerston as is a comin' down to take pot-luck with yer," said the hostess, with a good-humoured sneer. Will looked very knowing, as though the

possession of his secret was a great pleasure to him. “ You’ll know who ’tis one o’ these days, but you shouldn’t holler when you’re goin’ to take a nest—hey, Mrs. Smithson ? ”

He left her much puzzled, and walked quickly to his mother’s house. It was two hours before the lawyer could arrive, but Mrs. Prickett had already set out a meal for three.

There was a piece of streaky bacon, a loaf of huge size and inexhaustible appearance, and a large white wedge of American cheese. And to do fitting honour to the occasion, there was Mrs. Prickett in her Sunday dress, apparently doing her best to sit still and look “ the lady,” but falling short by a good deal of either.

"Go you and clean yourself, Will, but lawk o' me, if yer should ever come to be the Squire, I shan't know what to call yer."

"Ever should ! why I'm sure to, ain't I ?"

replied Will, angrily, as he turned to go upstairs to make his toilet.

"He don't speak handsome, nor he don't act handsome," mused Mrs. Prickett, her old eyes becoming watery ; "he'd never ha' fer-rited it out for hisself, nor he'd never ha' darkened the doors o' Hever Court if it hadn't ha' been for me. When I've been a thinkin' on it scores o' times, I've kinder felt as if I was a drivin' the Lord's enemies out o' the promised land. But now it's come to it, it seems shockin' like to go and tell 'em

of it hisself and bring it on the poor things like a thunderbolt."

At length Will reappeared, looking smart and sulky, and at the expected time the fly drove up and Mr. Gribble joined them. Tom was told to wait at the door.

Any fourth person of sense would have seen at a glance Mr. Gribble's contempt for his clients. He would have seen in the lawyer's quick reading of their faces and anxious yet deliberate adoption of his voice and manner, that he was intent upon his own purposes in this business, and would, when he could, use all his power over such people as these.

And there was an appearance of restless, scheming activity about Mr. Gribble which

boded ill for those who thwarted him of his purpose. He was not clean nor tidy, but both these personal defects seemed to result from want of time; indeed, his mode of doing business had so impressed Mrs. Prickett that she had a vague notion he never rested from his work. He was tall and thin, pale-faced, and his cheeks were rather hollow; but Mr. Gribble never looked really unpleasant till he laughed. In truth, he never did laugh; but when he made that long or short series of little jerky breaths which sounded like a stage “he! he!” by a very raw performer, then would the wise client have been warned and fled from Mr. Gribble. There was falsehood always written on the lawyer’s face, though to most

persons the ink was invisible, but when he laughed the writing seemed disgustingly plain, and his grey eyes staring witnesses to it, for they never joined in the laugh, but steadily kept a cold watch upon their master's purposes.

“ Well, Mr. Frankland,”—Will looked helplessly astonished at Mr. Gribble’s first mention of his newly-gotten name,—“ you see I have obeyed your wishes, even in adopting a most unprofessional course—most unprofessional.”

“ I don’t see that,” grumbled Will.

“ It is usual to open matters of this sort by correspondence; Mr. Edward Frankland may decline an interview.”

“ This is how I put it,” said Will, dog-

gedly: "s'pose there was a feller that had always had the whip hand of you. S'pose the gals always took to him and passed you by, well then, I ask you, if that feller was goin' to have a thrashin', wouldn't you like to be there to see it?"

"There's a good deal in that," replied Gribble, as though convinced by his client's argument.

"Tain't the way to get a blessin' on it," said Mrs. Prickett, suddenly and sharply, as though this was all she would say.

"You may have the blessin', mother, if I get the property."

"Let us see what we can do towards it," said Gribble, rising and making for the door.

Will felt very bold and confident as he stepped into the fly and told Tom to drive up to “the Squire’s;” but his heart fell as he passed the lodge gates, and he felt sure the woman who opened the gate thought he was in custody, and was being taken before Edward Frankland, who was a magistrate.

He made no response to the reluctant nod of the old servant who opened the door. “Ay, master’s at home,” was the reply to his question, when Mr. Gribble stepped forward, and handing his card and looking at Will, said, “you know this gentleman’s name.”

The servant found his master reading in the library. The room was not large, but it was handsomely and appropriately fur-

nished. The walls were panelled in dark oak, and where they were not hidden with books there hung a few choice pictures. The curtains and furniture were of dark green colour. The chimney-piece was of handsomely carved oak, and upon the central ornament was emblazoned in heraldic colouring the arms of the family. A large dog lay sleeping on the Turkey carpet at Edward's feet, who, reclining in an easy chair, was reading a newspaper when he received Mr. Gribble's card.

For a moment he thought of telling the servant to inquire their business, but reflecting that it was probably concerned with some scandalous conduct of Will's, he preferred to see them, or he thought it might

be connected with Lucy's fall from her mother's carriage. Edward had heard all the circumstances of the accident, and had no doubt that Will was both trespassing and poaching when he fired his gun, but no one was disposed to be inquisitive, as he had afterwards assisted Lucy.

He did not rise as they entered, but negligently saying, "Good-morning, Will," told the servant to place chairs for them; and dropping his paper, looked to Gibble for an explanation of their visit.

The lawyer's opening, "You know, sir, this is your father's son," surprised Edward; but as he went on presently to say, "We have come, sir, to show you that he, and not you, is Mr. Frankland, of Hever Court," a

scornful smile played round Edward's mouth as he regarded them with a look which said that they were not a very prepossessing pair of conspirators. But as Mr. Gribble, with unobserving persistence, unfolded his ease, produced the marriage certificate of Amy Campbell with his father, carefully detailing the evidence connected with this document, confessing that there was no similarity in the handwritings, that the entries as to addresses and other particulars were evidently false, then producing Amy's note and his father's ring, Edward became grave and attentive. Mr. Gribble read in his face that he was convinced of the truth of the evidence; and Will made no attempt to conceal his triumph. "It was more than a

year after her death when my father married?" was Edward's first and anxious question.

The lawyer reassured him on this point.

"We are not going to question *your* legitimacy," said Gribble, with a sneer.

There was an expression of bitter suffering on Edward's face ; his love for Lucy and his mother, his pride in his ancestral house and in himself, seemed to be shattered in one moment. All his hopes lay broken before him ; but he struggled to be master of himself, though he nearly choked with the effort. It was very repugnant, yet it seemed to be his duty to congratulate and to regard Will as his elder brother.

"This will be a great blow to my mother,"

he said, slowly and solemnly ; then rising and offering his hand to Will, he added, “But if this place is yours, Will, I won’t contest your claims ; I shall be sorry we have kept you out of it so long.”

“So you want to shake hands now,” said Will, putting his deliberately in his pockets ; “you didn’t do that afore.”

“No, I don’t ;” and Edward quickly withdrew his. He preferred it so, and felt almost glad that Will had thus refused his advances.

“As to keeping him out of his rights,” said Gribble, in a quiet yet firm voice, “for that of course you will have to render an account to Mr. William Frankland—I mean of the rents received since the death of your father, but we don’t propose to press you for

these beyond your ability to meet the demand, if you do all you can to facilitate the surrender of the estate to us."

The shock was passed, and it had strengthened Edward's character. What is to some gained only with the experience of years, had been compressed into these painful minutes. He could think now that this might be a conspiracy to dispossess him wrongfully, an attempt he was bound to resist. At all events it was necessary that a full investigation of the facts adduced by Mr. Gribble, should take place. Yet there lay the certificate on the table.

"You would doubtless think proper to examine the registry from which this was taken," suggested the lawyer, who followed

Edward's thought ; "and will take note of the parish church."

Edward did so, and then rose as if to signify that he wished them to leave.

"We shall expect," said Gribble, accepting Edward's movement, and brushing his hat with his sleeve, "a communication from you within a week, saying, I trust, that you are prepared at once to give up possession ; and if not we shall at once serve a writ of ejectment, and commence legal proceedings to obtain possession."

"Very well," assented Edward, as he held the door open.

Will looked confused and malicious, as, following close upon the heels of his adviser, they left the room.

But in the corridor they met Mrs. Frankland, who frowned haughtily as she recognised Will. Edward was following them, and she glanced from Will to him, wondering and annoyed that the man she regarded as a disgrace to the family should be there.

Will couldn't resist the opportunity.

"How d'ye do, mum ? he's"—he added, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of her son—"got a little bit of a story to tell you."

"What does this man mean, Edward ?"

"I'll tell you presently, mother ; when they're gone."

"She'd better hear it now," said Will, with a hateful grin.

"It's nothing less than proof, madam, of

the fact that this gentleman," said Mr. Gribble, pointing to Will, "is the eldest legitimate son of your late husband, and therefore the rightful owner of this house."

Mrs. Frankland's face expressed a sudden and intense agony. She gazed with dumb horror, which to see was frightful, towards her son, and read the worst in his grave and sympathetic look of love.

She uttered one low cry, and would have fallen but for his supporting arm. In the confusion that followed, Gribble and Will left the house. Edward carried his mother to a couch, and seeing that she did not recover her senses, sent for the doctor; there was only one in the village. When the medical man arrived, he said she was suffering from

“cerebral apoplexy,” and that her “nervous system must recently have sustained a severe shock.”

She was carried insensible to her bed, and lay there for two days and nights, anxiously and lovingly watched by Edward ; and on the third day she died.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN WHICH, AS USUAL, EROS WAITS ON

PLUTUS.

THE funeral of Mrs. Frankland was a very sad affair. The occasion of Will's visit to Hever Court had become known, yet no one was sure whether he or Edward would have the estate. The little that Will said to Mrs. Smithson and others showed that he felt confident of success, but in answer to a letter from Edward to Gribble they had consented to allow him another week for deliberation before serving the writ of eject-

ment. The day after his mother's funeral Edward went to London, and calling on the family solicitor, Mr. Royds, of Lincoln's Inn, found him—the picture of a respectable attorney—ready to accompany him in order to inspect the parish register from which the certificate presented by Gribble had been extracted.

Any one who knew Edward Frankland well would at once have observed the difference which the events of the last few days had produced in him. He was grave and thoughtful : and there was an occasional hardness about his mouth which at one time it would have seemed impossible for the beautiful and almost womanly curves of his lips to assume. Unconsciously he had been

measuring himself against what, it now appeared, was his future in life, and though the standard was excessively trying, yet he felt his force equal to an unaided struggle with the world, if it should come to that.

“We’ll not talk of this matter, Mr. Frankland, until we have been to the church. I’ve no doubt that the same thought in both our minds prompts our desire to see the register together, and to form our own opinion.”

Edward assented, and they drove to a church in a quiet western suburb, which might have been but a village when his father and Amy Campbell were together in this neighbourhood. The clerk was soon found. He was a fat, doughy-looking, asthmatic man, slow of speech, and of gait, and

of breath. “Not the man for a forgery, not—at—all—the—man,” thought little Mr. Royds. Something of the same mental conclusion was arrived at in Edward’s brain. The clerk wheezed and moved as though he wanted oiling inside and outside, while he placed the register for the year 1828 before them.

“Frankland, yer want—ugh!—ugh!—we had a pardy after that marriage t’other day.”

“Oh, indeed!” replied Mr. Royds, his little bright eyes seeming to aim at getting behind the stolid visage of the clerk; “and how did the party know the marriage was solemnised in this church?”

The parish clerk appeared to be struggling with his asthma.

Edward thought he was doing this only to gain time for a false reply, and made an impatient gesture.

“It ain’t often I’m garspin’ like this,” said the clerk. “How did he come to know? why he come here and he ses, ‘I want to search your registry of marriage for ’28;’ and then when he finds what he wants, he ses, ‘I want a certificate o’ this ‘ere weddin.’”

“’Ere’s the one as you want,” and the clerk laid his fat finger on the middle of a page. There was no doubt about the genuineness of the book and page; neither had been tampered with. There were no erasures in the leaf. It was all in vain that Mr. Royds scanned the page through his golden-rimmed

eye-glasses. He saw nothing wrong there. To be sure nothing but the names identified Edward's father and Will's mother; but then he had not expected to find any further coincidence.

“The tail of that ‘y’ looks queer,” said Mr. Royds, in a low voice, but with the air of a man determined to find a flaw, as he pointed to the word “Amy.”

“Certainly there is a slight difference of colour in the tails both in the column and in the signature, but there is nothing in that,” remarked Edward.

“No, there’s not much in that,” assented Mr. Royds. “But we must advertise; there may have been another John Frankland and another Amy Campbell.”

“It isn’t likely,” said Edward, yet he seized with hope this last chance of saving his inheritance.

“You were here while the party made his search?” asked Mr. Royds, turning to the clerk.

“Well, I was in and out, never out of sight, yer know.”

“We can’t be sure of that,” said the attorney, sententiously; “but I think we may return, Mr. Frankland?”

Mr. Royds advertised in all the newspapers; but nothing came of it, and when all the delay he could obtain had expired, Edward was again with his solicitor.

He professed himself thoroughly satisfied. He would have liked to fight for his inheri-

tance with any one else, but Will was certainly the elder son of his father, and now there seemed to be proof of his legitimacy. He even felt glad that it was so satisfactory, and that it left no doubt in his own mind about giving up the estate. But he asked Mr. Royds for his advice.

They were sitting in Mr. Royds' snug sanctum, and the attorney pulled his chair round and linked his hands over his knee as he replied,

“ I never felt so much difficulty, so much pain, in advising, but my instinct in the case seems so clear that I shall not recommend you to any counsel’s opinion. I should make the best possible terms for myself, and surrender everything. I know their case

has many very weak points, very weak points, but it is one which every judge would refer wholly to a jury, and one which nine juries out of ten would give against you. Juries are romantic, you know, they rather enjoy putting a good-for-nothing, idle fellow into possession of a fine estate ; their sympathies would be with him and not with you, and with a verdict in his favour you would be at the mercy of this man and his adviser,—who, so far as I can learn, is not very nice in his practice.”

Edward accepted this advice without hesitation, and it was arranged that Mr. Royds should communicate to Gribble his readiness to surrender Hever Court to Will, receiving security against all future claims, and

being allowed to take a few relics of his home.

“ You bear this sad blow bravely, Mr. Frankland ; but a young man of your abilities, with five thousand pounds which you inherit from your poor mother, is yet in an enviable position. It is early to ask what you purpose to do ? ”

“ My notion is to come to London, and — do something,” replied Edward vaguely.

It was a sad blow, he felt it in its full force as he returned homewards. He must not only give up his old home, and all its proud and happy associations, but, harder still, he must resign his hopes of Lucy’s love. In the full enjoyment of his prosperity he

had feared her preference for Lord Nantwich ; now he could not venture to ask her for that love of which he more than ever craved the possession.

Sad and lonely he sat in the fire-light of the spacious dining-room on the first evening of his return. All around him were mute reminders of a happiness which appeared to have died with his dear mother. The whole house seemed eloquent of her, of her death and of his own downfall. He tried to convince himself that it would be good for him to be forced thus to resign a life of mere indulgence for one of useful labour. But he had not been brought up to any profession, he had a very modest estimate of his own abilities, and felt a shrinking from the hard

conflict with the world which he must endure. Yet he would brace himself for the struggle, on the success of which all his hopes of winning Lucy for his wife must rest.

He clung to his love for her as the only object which gave value to his existence, the only motive sufficient to spur him onward in a new career.

The next day he wrote to Will. He could not feel any regard for the man whose brutality he considered had caused his mother's death. But his letter displayed no ill-feeling, nothing but cold formality. He was so anxious to get away from Hever Court that he was scarcely disposed to wait to hear if Will accepted the arrangement he

offered through Mr. Royds. He assumed that Gribble had communicated it to Will, and that Will would accept it, and named an early day for his elder brother to meet him and take possession.

Then he found relief for two days in arranging his affairs and selecting the few articles he was to take away.

On the second day, when he had finished this task, he was surprised to find Will and Gribble seated in the dining-room. “They had come,” so Mr. Gribble announced, “to say they agreed to his proposals, and would accept possession on Friday.”

“But you ain’t to take your chestnut mare, mind that,” said Will.

Edward looked scornfully at him.

“Are you going to remain here till I leave?” he said.

“We’re only going to take a look round,” sneered Gribble. And they rose leisurely, leaving the house.

It was necessary that he should pay a farewell visit to Thistlewood. He had fixed upon this afternoon for going there to take leave of Lady Denman and Lucy, so he ordered his horse and set out.

“Would they have heard of his dis-possession?” He hoped so, that he might be spared from telling them the story. Were it otherwise, he thought bitterly how, as he announced his departure, Lady Denman’s manner would become politely cool and formal, yet telling as plainly as the most

cruel language that he must lose not only his house but his love. And Lucy? She would not love him less—Edward felt sure of that; but did she care for him at all? that is, other than as a friend? He feared not. “And yet no one,” thought he, “can be insensible to such love as mine. If it has not positive dislike to overcome, it must win some increase of regard.”

Now that he must go, he was anxious to leave Hever Court. Whatever his new life was to be, there would be at least a sense of relief in escaping from his present false position. And Will’s manner to him of late had not been such as might have been expected from one who gained so much, and without a struggle, by his downfall. He

couldn't account for Will's harsh and somewhat brutal behaviour. He knew that Will coveted Clara Smithson for his wife ; he had heard so ; it was at one time the talk of the village ; but Edward was far too modest, and she had given him but little reason to suspect her passionate love for him, while he was much too proud to suppose that Will could be jealous of the ordinary attentions he had paid to Mrs. Smithson's handsome niece. He couldn't account in any way for the increased animosity which Will showed towards himself.

But this did not occupy much of his thought. As he approached Lady Denman's house, he was engrossed with the importance of this interview to himself. He

had nothing to say but good-bye. He would never more be their neighbour at Bingwell. But perhaps Lady Denman would ask him to call upon them in town. He had nothing more to gain. He couldn't ask Lucy to marry a man with a couple of hundred a year, and with no means of increasing his income. He must work for years, and with success, before he could venture to ask her. He felt he could do this with ever so little encouragement. He should be able to-day to see if she intended to throw him off altogether. Then he felt he would indeed be careless of his life. His heart told him how anxious he was now ; he could feel it beating as he dismounted and inquired for Lady Denman.

She was at home, but he found Lucy alone. He affected an unnaturally easy manner as he entered the drawing-room, intending to show Lucy that he was not broken down by his troubles.

He was saying, “I’m come to take leave, Miss Denman,” and she, “Mamma will be here presently,” when their hands and eyes met, and Edward read such a tender expression of sympathy in Lucy’s eyes, and felt it in the momentary lingering of her hand in his, that his artificial courage broke down within him, and he thought tears were coming to his eyes. His own loss of fortune could not have summoned them, but they came out of his grateful love of this gentle girl for her unspoken sympathy—sympathy

which he felt he needed most as he crushed down the almost irresistible impulse to clasp her to his heart.

CHAPTER XIV.

“THE WOMAN I LOVE, AND THE WOMAN
WHO LOVES ME.”

BUT it was only Edward’s intense craving for sympathy that gave him this impulse ; in a moment he reflected that it would be dishonourable and repugnant to his own pride to make proposals in this hour of his misfortunes.

“I suppose you have heard that I am going to leave Hever, Miss Denman ?”

Lucy had heard ; he could see this.

“I’m going to London, that refuge for the

destitute, and if I'd only a half-crown in my pocket instead of enough to live decently, I might do something in the Dick-Whittington line."

They laughed together at this view of the position.

"It's as well to look at it philosophically, you know," said Edward.

"Certainly," replied Lucy, with enthusiasm that was perhaps just a little fictitious ; "I am sure you will make a name for yourself now, and a position far higher than that of the Squire of Bingwell."

"You see, Miss Denman, I was horribly well satisfied with things as they were."

"Ah ! but ought you to be so ? That is the question."

“One can’t help shivering a little at the thought of being turned out into the cold world, yet there are many for whom the trial is greater than for me. But, Miss Denman, I beg you ten thousand pardons for inflicting the mention of my troubles on you,” said Edward, regaining by an effort his customary bright and hopeful look ; however he couldn’t maintain it, and his face fell as he added, “but one feels so awfully lonely ; it is that feeling in the contemplation of my future which I cannot face bravely.”

“Oh, but you have troops of friends, and will make them everywhere.”

“Have I ? I don’t know that. I think I had ; but can I assume that their kindness had no knowledge of my position ?”

"They would not be worthy the name of friends, if they were so untrue," said Lucy, warmly.

"It is enough for me if you——" As he spoke, Edward leaned towards Lucy, with an earnest meaning in his eyes which she could scarcely have misread. A momentary blush and drooping of her eyes, then they were raised, and as he hesitated how to proceed, she interrupted him.

"Mamma and I will hope to meet you often in London; we are going there, you know, very shortly."

At this moment a servant entered the room and gave Lucy what appeared to be a hurried message.

She rose directly, telling Edward that she was summoned to her mother's bed-room, as she was suddenly taken unwell ; that Lady Denman had desired her to make her excuses to him.

"Good-bye, Miss Denman." And he felt as he took her hand that never before had he realised his misfortunes. Now it seemed that he gave up all his hope of her.

They exchanged no other word, but Edward's heart was full to bursting as he re-mounted his horse.

And Lucy ran upstairs to her mother's room, struggling, but in vain, to keep back tears which, could he but have been aware that they flooded those softly eloquent eyes

for him, would surely have proved an anodyne for any trial he might have to endure.

As Edward rode homewards, he tried by every argument to arm himself with indifference as to the future. But all his circling thoughts found a common centre in Lucy. However, he felt that, as it must be so, the sooner he got away from Bingwell the better. Yet, now that he must give it all up, everything about the place seemed to have acquired a new, or rather a value before unknown in his eyes. He was conscious of attachment to the very roads and hedges, to all the landmarks which from boyhood were associated with the locality of his home.

When he came near to the White Horse he saw Mrs. Smithson standing in the doorway, her immense apron spreading its whiteness from side to side. He saw that she observed him, by a motion which she was wont to make towards those she called “the quality.” She spoke of it as a “eurchey,” and its effect was to allow the hem of her dress to touch the floor. Usually this was a little above the ground, displaying feet which gave ample security for her safe standing.

Edward was in no mood for talking, but he thought he could not leave the village without saying a word of adieu to one who had known him so long and so well as the good-humoured hostess of the

White Horse. So he turned towards the door.

Mrs. Smithson had perplexities on her side. She liked Edward in the way that such a woman does regard a popular, handsome, generous young squire. In her heart she didn't believe that Will was the legitimate son of his father. She couldn't believe it because it gave to rough, uneducated Will the property which seemed to her the natural possession of the cultivated, gently-nurtured Edward. But then her interests were sadly at variance with her predilections. She knew that Will was deeply enamoured of Clara, and she felt that her niece had only to use her charms and her imperious will to advan-

tage in order to be the future lady of Hever Court.

She had a profound sense of her own meanness as Edward approached, but she knew she could not, and perhaps if she could she would not make an effort to surmount it.

“I have come to bid you good-bye, Mrs. Smithson,” he said, smiling sadly.

Her impulse was to tell him to fight it out with Will, but she said :—

“Ay, there’s ups and downs in the world, ain’t there ; but yer know, Master Ed’ard, you’ll have the turn for a bit o’ good luck now. But won’t yer come in, sir ? ”

He dismounted, and fastening his bridle near the doorway followed her into the par-

lour. There he found Clara sitting in her usual attitude by the fire, and also, as usual, with a novel in her hand.

She turned her dark eyes upon him with a natural greeting and yet a deep meaning glance, inquiring to see how her heart's hero bore his altered fortunes. If all the good things that he was about to give up had but fallen to her, how gladly would she have thrown them back to him in exchange for one word of love! She might now possibly be the mistress of Hever Court. She knew that, but she knew better still in her heart of hearts that at a word or sign she would follow Edward's fortunes, however dark they might be, nor would she ever think she had made a sacrifice in leaving Will to

enjoy without her the wealth of Hever Court.

Household cares called Mrs. Smithson away, and they were left together.

“Well, you see, Miss Clara,” said Edward, gaily, “I danced with you the other evening under false pretences.”

“I am sorry——”

“Sorry—you sorry! Why, what would Will say if he heard you?”

“I don’t care for Will,” Clara pouted, her red lips displaying a beautiful scorn.

“But he cares for you,” said Edward, in a low voice.

“Can I help that?”

“No; I suppose pretty girls must submit to that sort of thing sometimes.”

“Mr. Edward,” Clara spoke in an unnatural voice, telling of an internal struggle, “why do you give way to him so easily?”

“Because I think I am only giving him his right. I can’t claim the merit of doing it with much pleasure.”

“He is not a gentleman.”

“Oh! five thousand a year will make him one.”

“You don’t believe it; you will always be one.” And the girl hung her head and blushed at her own boldness.

“Thanks. Kind words are pleasant to the unfortunate.”

With her eyes still downcast, Clara said—
“I would give more if I might.”

It was not the words she spoke so much as their tone, so sad and sweet, that moved Edward.

"Surely there is no proper limit to kindness."

"Is there not," she said, stealing a bright glance at his face, "between you and me? Has the world no rules on the subject?"

He marked the quivering of her lips, the subdued passion of her voice. But he thought it was excess of pity.

"You are very, very kind. But my position is not so very bad, so pitiable. Besides, I am young."

"Pity! I don't pity you—I—love—you!"

The softly whispered confession seemed to be spoken involuntarily. She hid her crimsoned face in her hands, through which there came a stifled sob.

Edward was amazed and embarrassed. Clara lifted her blushing face, her bosom heaving with excitement.

“I know I ought to be ashamed of myself, but can you suppose that your sex alone is doomed to this self-torture? Men may proclaim their feelings and pursue their object untouched by shame, but we must kill our passion, or—it must kill us.”

Then her voice, which had risen as it seemed over the barriers of her self-control, fell again to a loving softness as she added :—

“I would so have done by mine, had you still been as you were.”

Edward knew not what to do, so he did that which perhaps it were better he had not done. He took her hand, and gently pressing it, stammered :—

“I had no—idea of this—you believe me ; —do you not ?”

She had turned away from him, but without withdrawing her hand. There was bitter pride in her reply :—

“I never asked your love.”

He dropped her hand.

“It is worthless, but I had none to give.”

“And I cannot recall mine.” Then another gust of passion swept before it all sense of restraint. Her hands hanging low, ner-

uously clasped together, she entreated : “Oh ! take it ; let me love you. I would then welcome your misfortunes. Say, ‘Follow me.’”

In the depth of her conscious yet willing self-abasement, she had overpassed now any sense of shame. Yet she made no advance towards him, but stood with her hands, as it were, fettered ; her head resting on her breast in a posture which seemed to mingle dignity with the expectation of a self-condemned criminal.

Edward was not insensible to her beauty, nor unmoved by her love. He could scarcely describe his sensations. Easy indeed would it have been for him to yield to her attractions, but that his eye and his heart were

full of pictures of another loveliness, and that the fresh image of Lucy's pure and gentle beauty stood between him and this witching temptress. Clara's avowal could not of itself have inspired disgust. It was too real if it was reckless. It was the contrast, with his strong love for Lucy, that summoned this unwelcome feeling to his mind. Yet he strove to avoid forcing any sense of shame upon Clara.

"Miss Smithson," he replied, "will you accept and respect my confidence?"

"You may trust me," said Clara, making no motion but with her lips.

"With all my heart and soul, then, I love——"

"Don't tell me—I might hate her. For

me, of course, there remains only your contempt. Adieu!"

Edward was about to protest something, but she hurried past him out of the room, leaving him nothing to do but to regain his horse and resume his ride homewards.

CHAPTER XV.

A FRATERNAL ENCOUNTER AT NEVER COURT.

IN her thoughts for her niece's advancement Mrs. Smithson overlooked the effect of his sudden elevation upon Will himself. Will Campbell and William Frankland were very different personages. Will had appeared reckless and prodigal and a slave to every caprice of Clara's, yet with a strongly developed selfishness which kept him always, though only just, upon the brink of danger and difficulty. But with the knowledge that he was possessed of what seemed to him

illimitable wealth, all that was worst in his nature was encouraged. Riches to him meant self-indulgence, freedom to steep himself in all the gratifications dearest to his sensuous nature. He had cast off, without even the consciousness of his debt, the ties that bound him to his foster-mother.

He couldn't understand her tears, nor appreciate the homely pride with which the poor woman feigned to disregard his rejection of her sympathy or humble partnership in his good fortune. It was not that he felt the consciousness of birth and social position superior to hers, but that she formed no part in his views of the future. He had done with her; if she bothered him with her

affection or advice it could only be because she wanted to get money or money's worth out of him. What else could anybody want of him now ?

Hardest of all it was to him to fancy himself the master of that solemn butler and the luscious subterranean treasures of which he was the guardian ; to be free to fill the stables at Hever Court with horses, and to have them and their grooms at his command ; to wander at liberty over the stubbles and through the coverts with Thompson, his old enemy, now his obedient servant, at his heels,—all this was intoxicating delight. Often, too, he thought of Clara's sumptuous charms, but quite as often with a strange fear of her power over him as with the

desire to possess himself of them. Of course he could do so if he would ; he didn't for a moment doubt that she would try all in her power to become the mistress of himself and his fortune. But it was for this very reason that he avoided her. Love with him meant acquisition, not surrender. He knew that her eye could charm him to do her will ; he felt, he feared it had this power. And he knew that if he married her, it was she and not he who would reign at Hever Court : sometimes it seemed to him quite as though she were his rival for this splendid fortune. She appeared to have established some rights over him, yet she had always been proudly disdainful, and had never allowed him to speak a word of love to her. He would

resist these claims and clear himself of her once for all.

Not less often there mingled with his thoughts the recollection of the moments when he had held Lucy in his arms. Her gentle beauty seemed to demand no such terrible reprisals. If his wealth could win her he might be safe against her interference with his enjoyments. He had no idea that strength of character could rest beneath softly calm eyes and gentle manners. To win Lucy would be to add but another pleasure to those that awaited him. A pleasure to which there would be no drawbacks, for he could quickly make her feel his mastership if harsh treatment afterwards became necessary.

To win Lucy would also secure his position in the county. But William Frankland cared little for this ; a nearer and dearer thought was that he would then be the doubly successful rival of Edward. Yet, so far from any open hostility between the two brothers, there had taken place, as it appeared to Bingwell, an affectionate reconciliation between them.

Edward, on his part, had felt very unwilling to leave home at enmity with his half-brother, and exceedingly desirous, if only for the sake of appearances, that there should be a mutual acknowledgement and recognition of their relationship in the altered position it had lately assumed. There could not be any reality of good-will between them, such

was his conviction. But as Will was now undoubtedly the head of his family, he would make an effort that they should part at least in seeming amity.

Suppressing his desire to get away from Bingwell, he had forced himself to say all this to Will, and to propose that he should be Will's guest at Hever Court for a fortnight.

On his side, Will at once saw the advantages to himself in this new arrangement. It would relieve him from the unpopularity he must certainly incur if he appeared to turn the popular young squire out of the house. It would help him in launching into his new position ; and besides, he already comprehended how much it was to his own

advantage that he should learn more of Edward's practical acquaintance with the affairs of the estate.

So it had happened that they were now both at home at Hever Court.

With all the delicate tact of which he was master, Edward sought to make Will feel that himself, and not Edward, was the master of the house. Will accepted the position, but with the most repulsive coarseness. All day the sense of his own inferiority galled him until the evening, when he drank himself into forgetfulness.

Nearly every evening that they had passed together he had been first sulky, then drunkenly quarrelsome, from that passing into a state of maudlin intoxication, and so on into

a heavy sleep, from which he was aroused, but not awoke, by the servant who led him to his bed-room.

So they sat one evening ; just after dinner, when the duration of Edward's stay was drawing to a close. He was not sorry for this ; for there remained only one pleasure which he meditated with delight. To-morrow was the occasion of a local agricultural show, and he knew that he should meet Lucy there, for she never failed to display her interest in the cottagers' exhibition of fruit and garden produce, and the poor loved her. He had called to inquire after Lady Denman's health, and being assured that her ladyship was out, prompted by his sensitive pride, had regarded her indisposition as

assumed, in order to break off his acquaintance.

The two brothers were alone. The lamp-light shone upon the glass and plate upon the table, upon dark polished oak near and far throughout the room, upon stately chairs ranged against the walls beneath family portraits, among which the newest and brightest showed the sombre features of their father, more like those of Will than of Edward, and the intellectual and high-bred features of Edward's mother, which were all his own.

Heavily reclining in an easy-chair, Will moved only to fill his glass from the bottle of port-wine, which Edward did not choose to share. Both were dressed in mourning; but Will did not look at home. For all his

new clothes and his easy posture he could but have passed for a stalwart young rustic.

Edward was drinking claret and reading, though he now and then lowered his book to reply to some remark of Will's.

He was describing a ride he had had that day.

“And then I came to that little farm of yours, Ned.” This was a small farm of about sixty acres, Edward had inherited from his mother, and which, together with the five thousand pounds, made all his wealth. “You must let me have that farm,” Will continued, “I'll buy it of you. One cover on it is worth two or three of the Hever covers.”

“I don't mean to sell it.”

"Well, then, you needn't; only every head o' game will be poached while you're away."

Edward looked annoyed.

"I told Thompson to give an eye to it," he said.

"That be hanged; I ain't going to have my men under anybody's orders but my own."

Edward saw that Will was in his quarrelsome stage of intoxication, and knowing it was impossible to avoid a quarrel if he pursued the subject, he resumed his reading.

Will went on drinking. Presently he hiccoughed, and a drunken smile of self-satisfaction had settled on his face.

"You call yourself a gentleman; but you

ain't half such a jolly chap as Arthur Denman was."

Edward felt a shock at Will's mention of the name of Lucy's brother. His name was almost forgotten in Bingwell, or remembered only as a warning. He had been a wild young man, and Will his favourite companion. Through his father's influence he had obtained some appointment in London, but within a year after he left Bingwell, he died, some said accidentally, others by his own hand. He was a few years older than Edward, who remembered him as a child to have heard of Arthur as a monster of wickedness, whose conduct had caused his father and mother great unhappiness.

Edward had no wish to encourage Will to

talk of Arthur. But Will's tongue was loosed from any need of encouragement.

"Ah! he was a good sort," Will went on; "he wouldn't have sat there drinking that vinegar stuff of yours. Many's the lark him and me's had. But Master Arthur went a bit too far at last; he came it too strong."

"He treated his parents shamefully," said Edward, who found it impossible to resist the interest he felt in all that concerned Lucy's family.

Will leered at him with a look which betrayed a sottish pride of superior knowledge upon the subject, and a desire to gauge the ignorance of his companion.

"There's only one or two people that

knows all about that, and you ain't one of them." Will hiccupped between his words, and his voice was becoming thick.

"Who do you mean?"

"Who should I mean; why, me and Lady Denman to be sure. But there's another lady I mean to tell it to before long. She wouldn't hold her head so high above me, I think. But, my word, she's a screamer."

Edward feared he was referring to Lucy, and darted an angry scowl at Will.

"You know who I mean, old chap, I see; let's drink her health—Lucy Denman. I wish I'd have kissed her that night when I had her in my arms."

"Don't mention her name—you are not

fit to speak of her, you beast!" exclaimed Edward in a fury.

Will eyed him steadily for a moment. It seemed as though some strong feeling were overmastering the effect of the wine. Then he rose from his chair and aimed a tremendous blow at Edward's face. Foiled by Edward's adroitness in avoiding it, he staggered forward and fell on the floor.

Thereon a furious tussle ensued, Edward defending himself against Will's greater strength and his drunken rage. It was a shocking scene; two men rolling about upon the floor, overturning tables and chairs, crashing wine-glasses and plates in their struggle; Will cursing and abusing Edward with the most horrid oaths and the

foulest language ; their clothes torn, with flushed faces and rough hair, striving one against the other, until at length Edward succeeded in throwing Will, and disengaging himself from him, gained the door and escaped to his own room.

They were never again together in any one apartment of Hever Court.

Edward would have left the house the next morning, but that was the day of the agricultural show, and he could not deny himself the pleasure of seeing Lucy once more. But he packed and sent his luggage to the station to await his coming from the show. The day was fine, and he set out on foot ; he wouldn't take one of Will's horses, feeling that he was leaving Hever Court

for ever, of which he had been born and brought up as its future unquestioned master. It was one of those clear, bright days in early autumn, when the summer reappears as though it was not yet dead, but living in a vigorous old age. Dew-drops glittered like diamonds on the grass ; the clumps of trees, with which the park was studded, never looked more beautiful than now when the rich and variegated tints of autumn were upon them. Sheep and deer browsed together on the pastures, which in their charming undulations and unseen boundaries seemed to slope away into infinite quiet and a repose untroubled by the noise of the busy world. Never did this happy languor appear to him more delicious

than this morning ; yet in the longing, lingering regret for his old house, there mingled a feeling of curious interest in that new and unexplored track he must now take in life.

The lodge-keeper, as he touched his hat, did not know that Edward would not return to Hever Court.

Along the road he knew that he was the subject of every gossip. Groups of labourers in holiday costume were trudging the same way with himself. He thought more than once that he heard his name mentioned as he passed some of them. He amused himself with reflections on their homely pride of dress. Here was one whose strong point was his tall beaver hat, which

nothing but Sundays and holydays could draw from its working-day box. There were fops who showed a bit of red waistcoat at the lappet of their green or white smock-frocks, the collars of which were worked with intricate finish and displayed blue or white glass buttons. With the more well-to-do, the *chaussure* was the point which had received the most outlay and attention. Bright new buff-coloured gaiters or buskins topped their formidable high-lows, which trod the ground with a weight and a span becoming the stride of the ploughman, a good deal like the heavy swing of their huge teams, and iron-shod with metal almost as heavy.

Will's elevation was not popular with this

class. The agricultural labouring class is invariably Conservative with respect to the gentry. They don't like *parvenus*. Probably for the same reason that school-boys dislike a monitor chosen from their own ranks. He knows too much of their ways, and they know too much of his. Every class has its shams, its weaknesses, unknown to the bulk of those who have always been members of other classes. The born gentleman ignores these in his visits to his labourers, but the enriched working-man has a terribly keen eye for them.

Then there is the jealousy which the sudden elevation of one, nearly of their own class, causes. But this was not so much felt in Bingwell, because Will had become squire

by evident right,—by the best right of being the old squire's eldest son.

All whom Edward met saluted him with affectionate respect and an evident sympathy. To those he knew well he spoke kindly, but said nothing of his leaving, to avoid conversation upon subjects which could not be agreeable to him.

The road had now narrowed and passed between high banks covered with dense underwood. Coming to a gateway, Edward left the road, thinking to mount the ridge behind the gate, and get one last look at Hever Court. The gateway opened into a narrow gap between the woods, so narrow indeed that the tall underwood overhung the path and roofed it with russet

leaves against the now powerful rays of the sun.

Once through the gateway, Edward found himself in perfect silence and solitude. When he had taken a look over the fair landscape which but a few weeks back had seemed unquestionably his own, he turned back, intending to continue his way to the show.

He was leaning on the gate musing on his past and future when he heard a voice in the road. He could also hear the sound of wheels and of horses' feet, but they were approaching slowly at a walking pace, and the light sandy soil of the roadway made little noise under them. He recognised Will's voice, but he had not caught his words.

There was then a short pause. Edward could see no one, but the next voice he heard thrilled through him. It was Lucy's.

"Do you impose terms to reward your silence, and what are they?"

Lucy's voice was cold and resolute, yet there was enough in the sound to tell Edward of her anxiety to conciliate Will.

Edward had no thought at the moment of the indignity of listening. His whole being seemed dead except in that point where his eager hearing was concentrated.

Just at this moment Lucy's pony carriage came within his view from the gateway. Will was riding at her side farthest from him. Lucy's face was pale, and Edward

thought he could see how she strove to repress any symptom of the anxiety her voice betrayed. Yet there was no trace of unworthy embarrassment. She had never looked more lovely than when the severe expression which her face now wore gave a more than ordinarily intellectual character to her delicate beauty.

Edward was reminded of Will's horrid smile the night before when he now saw him bend down from his saddle so as to bring his face near to hers, and say,

“How can a pretty young lady ask such a question?” The leer with which this was accompanied left no doubt as to the terms he intended to impose.

Edward saw, he thought he even felt,

Lucy's shudder. But her features seemed immovable.

"You would not have me do violence to my feelings." This was all she replied. It was torture to Edward that he could hear no more of their conversation. It would be worse to go on and see them still together, Will proudly mounted on a horse that had been Edward's own, perhaps exchanging confidences with Lucy from which he must stand aloof and on foot. Lucy was evidently in no need of personal protection, and he could not see her without betraying, at least the consciousness of what he had heard.

Whatever might be the secret which gave Will this influence over her, influence which

he would doubtless use to the utmost of his power without mercy or remorse, Edward knew it could be connected with no fault or sin of hers, for he held her in his heart guiltless as an angel.

An hour later he was at the Bingwell station, and, finding his luggage had already arrived, took the next train to London.

CHAPTER XVI.

EDWARD PROCEEDS TO MAKE HIS FORTUNE
IN LONDON.

HAVING no profession, or indeed any special knowledge, Edward was but poorly equipped for a successful fight in the battle of life in London. He had been an Eton boy and an Oxford man ; there his education ended. He was high-spirited, frank, and sanguine, with the nicest possible sense of honour, and a most engaging, because most trustful and artless manner. But just twenty-five years of age, the only persons he

could look to for any advice were Sir John Denman and Mr. Royds ; both men nearer seventy than sixty ; and he had no notion of guiding himself by their advice. Were he to consult them, he would, of course, feel himself bound to respect and to follow their counsels. He didn't doubt it would be good advice, well flavoured with prudence and the wisdom of years ; but if he wanted to make a short cut to fortune, was it likely that septuagenarian counsels would assist him ? Such was the point of view from which he regarded these counsellors. Sir John Denman was an old gentleman, of whose occupation Edward had no precise idea. He had heard it said that the atmosphere of London suited Sir John, and had a notion

that he passed his time grubbing among old papers with the zeal of an antiquary. Some said he passed his years in London busied with stock-jobbing operations. Some said that the reason he was so rarely to be seen with his wife, was owing to a quarrel and a separation mutually agreed to ; others merely said there was incompatibility of temper, and they were better apart ; while a few threw out dark hints and wagged their heads as though a mystery overhung Sir John's family.

And Mr. Royds, he was so intensely respectable as to have no energy whatever. It was quite impossible that he could teach a young man how he might quickly guide his steps to a fortune.

Edward had lodged himself in Wells Street, Jermyn Street, and on the morning after his arrival in town, called on Mr. Royds. He found his fortune to consist of about five thousand pounds, invested in Consols, and absolutely at his own disposal. He had beside this the little farm near to Hever Court managed by a bailiff, who would account to him for the produce.

A commonplace solicitor, seeing that Edward was an inexperienced young man, would have given him, willing or unwilling, some counsel about the future, or at least have made inquiry as to his plans; but such was not Mr. Royds. He had held all his rich and titled connection together by keeping strictly “within the four corners of his

instructions." And such inquiries might be regarded as impertinent interference, so he contented himself with asking Edward to dinner that evening in Russell Square.

There he met the two Misses Royds, who were youngish ladies distinguished by a frigid amiability of manner. They were very strong-minded. One wore blue spectacles, both abjured crinoline, and had views on woman's rights. So Edward found the entertainment rather dull, and as he walked to his lodgings smoking his cigar, thought he had done well in resolving not to be too intimate there, or too much influenced by Mr. Royds.

But what was he to do? The problem before him stood, How to get into a financial

position in the least possible time, such as would enable him to propose to Lucy, without feeling ashamed of himself in doing so.

Should he ever hear that Will's sinister influence had been strong enough to make her marry him, then Edward felt he would throw up the game of life at once. He feared Lady Denman's worldly nature ; she would certainly prefer that Lucy should choose Lord Nantwich or even Will Frankland, rather than himself. But he had faith that Lucy disliked the cynicism of the nobleman, and felt disgust for the vulgar presumption of the other.

What was he to do ? A week, a fortnight passed with no solution of this momentous question. He had gained some familiarity

with London. Once he thought he saw Lucy in Hyde Park with her mother, but he was not sure. Probably he would not have called if he knew where they lived, but they had no town house and were in lodgings, where he did not know. He met several college friends, but they were all busy with their own affairs, and never had been men whom he cared to consult as to his own.

One day his attention was attracted by this advertisement in the *Times* :—

TO CAPITALISTS.—WANTED, a Gentleman as Director of a Limited Liability Company. A fortune may be made by the investment of five thousand pounds, while the Directors' fees alone will pay good interest. Security given on real property, or the party may join in the superintendence of the company's affairs. Apply by letter only, with a reference, to Jos. Snodgers, Esq., financial agent, 99, Norfolk Street, Strand, W.C.

"I suppose it's a swindle," said Edward. But he read it over again. At all events its promises were fair. He knew that limited liability meant security against a greater loss than the full amount of the shares taken. At least there was the promise of full security and the position of director. He cut out the advertisement, and walked to Norfolk Street to reconnoitre the residence of Mr. Snodgers.

At No. 99 the door was open, exposing a glass door within. There were two bells on one side of this door, and underneath one of them a small brass plate, bearing the name, "Mr. Snodgers," and beneath that was inscribed, "First Floor, Ring the Bell."

He had a great mind to disobey Mr. Snodgers' injunction and to call instead of writing. It would save him so much trouble, and if the affair were genuine he would be sorry to lose it by the delay. So he ventured to pull the bell. Immediately something was heard tumbling down-stairs, which proved to be a boy, who presented an inky nose to Edward, and informing him that Mr. Snodgers was in, preceded him up-stairs. He was so fortunate as to find Mr. Snodgers disengaged, and to be shown to his room at once.

Edward was bristling with suspicion ; but the appearance of Mr. Snodgers at once made him more smooth ; Mr. Royds himself did not appear more respectable. There looked

up from a table near the centre of the room a hale and hearty gentleman of about sixty, with a freshcoloured face, settled very respectably into his collar, the whiteness of which, together with that of his shirt-front, were irreproachable. A black neck-handkerchief loosely tied in a bow gave a sort of parliamentary finish to his head. One could fancy Mr. Snodgers the idol of his home circle. When he composed himself at tea-time, passing his hand through his grey hair, his ruddy cheeks and twinkling eyes full of laughter, perhaps, at some joke he had brought home with him, one could fancy an admiring wife and daughters petting this comfortable-looking man. It is common, among a certain class, to say “a warm

man," meaning "a well-to-do man." Edward was not acquainted with Mr. Snodgers' means, but he looked every inch of him a warm man, wanting nothing, and, as it were, playing at business just to give him a zest for the pleasures of his home.

In a momentary glance, Edward also surveyed the apartment. The furniture seemed old and good. There was a couch which neutralised the otherwise official aspect of the place, and a desk and letter-press which confirmed it. Two or three tin boxes laid against the walls ; on one he read, "Cotopaxi Mining Company, Limited." He took notice also of an iron safe let into the wall near the fire-place, and of a leather arm-chair to which Mr. Snodgers was

pointing an invitation, while Edward was making an apology for calling instead of writing “with reference to that advertisement in the Times.”

“We are obliged to do it, you see, sir,” and Mr. Snodgers smiled good-humouredly, “to keep off a pack of fellows who would try to make a handsome thing out of an affair of this sort, as agents, you know.”

Edward bowed his acknowledgment of the distinction.

“I’ve had as many as half-a-dozen of them here this morning for the particulars ; but I knew they were all men of straw.” Mr. Snodgers metaphorically flipped them away with his pen.

“I am inquiring on my own behalf ; but,”

Edward added, with hesitating candour, “I cannot profess great experience in these matters.”

“The less the better, I was going to say,” rejoined Mr. Snodgers. “But then somebody must look to ‘em. When I arbitrated between the Dumbleton and Whetstone Railways, the Dumbleton chairman said to me, ‘What a head you’ve got for figures, Snodgers!’ And they gave me a piece of plate. They behaved very handsomely. But you will permit me to inquire your name?”

“Mr. Edward Frankland.”

“Frankland, eh? well that is very curious, quite a coincidence.”

“Why?”

“I had some old friends of that name, that is all, sir,” and Mr. Snodgers seemed willing to leave the subject.

“Mine is a Hertfordshire family, the Franklands of Hever Court, Bingwell.”

“My friends were London people, in a very humble station of life, and they are all dead.” And as their memory seemed painful to Mr. Snodgers, Edward pursued the subject no further.

Then Mr. Snodgers, untying a bundle of papers, proceeded to inform Edward that the concern alluded to in the advertisement was a large business in the iron trade, which was to be purchased on very advantageous terms and transformed into a limited company.

“ You see our object is to get it into as few hands as possible.” Mr. Snodgers looked for a moment quite covetous, as he thought of its going to the outer public. His voice was soft and smooth, and the particulars sounded well.

Edward remarked something about investigation before going any further or expressing any definite proposition.

“ Exactly,” replied Mr. Snodgers. “ Then if you like you will make the advance upon the ample security of the premises, to be repaid in shares at par when the company is formed.”

Edward said he had no objection to make further inquiry.

“ I propose, then, to meet to-morrow

at five at Batt's Iron Works, Southwark ; there you'll meet Mr. Batt and see his premises."

"One question, Mr. Snodgers ; if you are going to form a company, why do you want so large a sum as five thousand pounds before commencing ? "

"Oh !" said Snodgers, and there was really a kind confidence in his manner as he left his chair and came close to Edward. " Batt won't of course sign the agreement to sell his old-established business without five thousand on account ; and, you know, why should he ? "

That Mr. Batt shouldn't want five thousand pounds down appeared so incomprehensible to Mr. Snodgers that Edward

thought Mr. Batt must be right and reasonable in his proposals.

“An old trade, highly respectable, making forty per cent. profits.” The financial agent dropped the words as though they tasted nice and rich, and he were unwilling to part with them.

When Edward found himself walking up Norfolk Street, he began to think he was sorry it was the iron trade. But why not the iron trade as well as any other? He had no answer to this question except a sort of prejudice against iron as being rusty and dirty, and rarely, as he thought, dealt in by gentlemen. The idea of passing much of his time in Southwark too, was not very pleasant. But then he had a purpose to carry

out, and if iron was to be the road to gold, he wouldn't be too particular. At all events, he had promised to meet Mr. Snodgers, with Mr. Batt and his solicitor, at the works tomorrow.

CHAPTER XVII.

EDWARD FINDS A GOOD INVESTMENT.

BATT's Iron Works lay between Bankside and the river. There were some furnaces and a casting-house, where at times the molten iron might be seen shimmering like red-hot soup. There were stocks of old iron which had served many purposes ; old frying-pans and kitchen utensils of every sort, coffin-plates and ancient rusty furniture of ships, bolts and keels and tackling, all decayed and worn out. Just behind the entrance gate was a low building, wherein

there was perhaps a little less dirt and rust and coal-dust, and wherein, on one side of a shabby old desk, like to an old dog-kennel with an upper section taken off, sat a rusty-looking clerk. This room was distinguished as the counting-house.

From this a door, marked “private,” opened into another room, in which stood a table covered with green baize, and a few chairs. Over the chimney-piece was hung the advertisement-almanac of an insurance office. But every article was speckled with blotches of rust, and a grimy covering of rust spread over all. No one could venture to touch anything in Batt’s counting-house without being oxidised.

The rusty clerk looked up from his desk

as two persons entered. It was about a quarter to five. They were both tall, but Mr. Batt was much older than his solicitor. The iron merchant was a portly man, whose chin, thickly clad with grey beard, seemed to have attracted all the hair from his head, which was bald, but for a light fringe showing beneath his hat. In early life Mr. Batt had been at sea, and had retained the frank manner and much of the easy dress of a sailor.

If he formed the subject of conversation, as he did sometimes, of a knot of men at the neighbouring Striker's Arms, you would hear him spoken of in many different fashions. His own people always spoke well of him ; there was, indeed, a tradition that he once

threw a “pig” at a man who disobeyed him, and then cast his dead body into the river, from whence it never came again, being, as was said, washed out to sea. But this mystery did not lessen his power in the works. He was reputed to be an honest, fearless man of business, and a bold speculator. But there was no sign of care on Mr. Batt’s broad face as he looked at the rusty clerk, and receiving “No” from him to his question, “Any one been, Snaggs?” followed his solicitor into the private room.

The lawyer sat down, stretched himself, and said,—

“What do you think of Snodgers?”

There was a self-satisfied smile as he put this which seemed habitual, and to express

that he only questioned people for their entanglement and his own diversion, but that he knew all they would tell him beforehand.

"I tell you what, Mr. Gribble," replied Batt, "Snodgers is the cleverest feller—the cle-ver-est-fel-ler out,—that's what he is."

"He's going to bring the party here at five o'clock, isn't he ?"

"Yes ; he says the party's willing to advance five thousand on the works."

"Snodgers is the promoter of the new company, I s'pose ?"

"I begin to wish I hadn't agreed with Snodgers for the sale of the business." Mr. Batt plunged both his hands into his pockets, and looked full of thoughtful regret.

Mr. Gribble was at the window gazing

through a wire blind towards the gate of the works, anxiously expecting the arrival of Mr. Snodgers and the party. Suddenly he turned to Batt,—

“Tell Snaggs to say you’re engaged, and to keep ’em outside. The party will never advance the money if he sees me here. They’re coming !”

Mr. Batt had lived long enough to defer his anxiety for explanation of this strange warning on the part of his attorney, until he had duly cautioned Snaggs to offer Mr. Snodgers and his friend seats until he was disengaged. “He would knock when he was ready for them to come in. It’s Mr. Tupper, from Swansea, that’s with me.—Mr. Tupper, d’ye hear, Snaggs ?”

“I’ve cost that young fellow with Snodgers as much as five thousand a year lately,” said Gribble; “but how the deuce am I to get out?”

In answer to Mr. Batt’s wondering inquiries, Gribble only replied that he had found out the true heir to an estate of which Edward had been in possession, and had now lost.

“Here, you can get out of this window! —I hear them speaking to Snaggs.”

Mr. Batt suited action to his words and opened a casement, which being opposite to the door could not be observed from the counting-house.

“You’ll take the five thousand by way of mortgage—if you can get it.” Mr. Gribble

gave this advice astride the window-sill.
“Don’t forget to pay me that five hundred
for costs in Rigden’s affair when you get
this money—that’s all.”

“A cheque shall be sent you next morning,” said Mr. Batt, in a tone so firm and reliable, that of itself would surely have gained credit for a larger amount. He helped Mr. Gribble’s left leg outwards, and, as he closed the window, saw his solicitor prudently in hiding by the corner of the building, waiting probably until, sure of Edward’s entry into the private room, he could leave the works unobserved.

Edward’s heart fell at the dirty aspect of the place. Still there was an appearance of very active and thriving business about it.

And he supposed that in no case would he have much to do with the works. In fact, he was so anxious to get his money out to the best advantage, that when Mr. Batt emerged from his room and invited them to walk in, he had resolved that the grimy appearance of the place was much in its favour, and looked well for the prospects of the company.

He was pleased, too, with the bluff manners and simple straightforwardness of Mr. Batt. "It's a dirty place, sir, for you to come to," he said, offering his big, rough hand to Edward; "but our dirt means trade, and trade brings profits."

Mr. Snodgers looked on these amenities with satisfaction. He appeared as usual so

happy and eminently respectable, so quiet and deliberate in his movements, as to form quite a contrast to Mr. Batt. There was a little of the old school about Mr. Snodgers, while the proprietor of the iron works was rough and of the modern industrial type.

But a very attentive observer might have guessed that Mr. Snodgers' entire thought was not centred upon this interchange of courtesies between Edward and Mr. Batt, for he would have traced a just perceptible expression of surprise as Mr. Snodgers entered the room, and threw a wandering glance around it, settling at length upon the window.

Mr. Snodgers, however, kept both his surprise and his suspicions to himself.

He briefly explained to Edward that their business there was very simple. "Would he lend Mr. Batt five thousand pounds upon security of this valuable leasehold wharf and premises, with all the very valuable stores and stock-in-trade? The wharf alone was valued at seven thousand pounds."

Mr. Batt looked as though he had no interest whatever in the matter. In fact, it appeared rather as if Mr. Snodgers were driving him from his old-established business.

If this matter were concluded, Mr. Snodgers pointed out, the formation of the company would proceed, but without in the least affecting Mr. Frankland's security. Meanwhile, by this advance of capital, Mr.

Batt would be able to keep the business going with, if possible, a yet increased success.

Edward looked round the wharf and thought these big stacks of iron, these forges, and stables and horses, must be worth a great deal of money. And the wharf might well be worth the amount stated by Mr. Snodgers.

But he stoutly refused to agree to accept shares in the new company in payment of his mortgage. He might be willing to take shares for the full amount when the company was formed, but he must judge for himself after the formation of the company. If his solicitor, Mr. Royds, was satisfied, he would advance the money, and any negotiation as

to the company could then be made without reference to the mortgage, which would be an ordinary advance, bearing interest at—as Mr. Snodgers had proposed—four and a-half per cent.

The financial agent looked as though he could have been very angry. His large under lip fell. But there was only a slight trace of disappointment in his voice, as he said, “You want to pick the plums out of the pudding, sir, I see.”

“I make you an offer,” replied Edward, haughtily; “you can take it or not, as you please.”

“You will advance the money?”

“Yes; if all the statements made by you appear to my solicitor to be satisfactory.”

“Well, Mr. Batt, what do you say?” asked Snodgers.

“It’s for you to say, Mr. Snodgers ; you’ve got my agreement for the sale of the premises and business.”

“But that has nothing whatever to do with this transaction,” interrupted Edward.

“I can find good use for the money in the business,” said Mr. Batt, roughly. There seemed to be no anxiety on his part to get Edward’s money.

So the matter was settled. Subject to Mr. Royds’ approval, Edward would advance the money on mortgage, and Mr. Snodgers was to push forward the formation of Batt’s Iron Works Company, Limited ; Edward being willing to become a director and a

shareholder, possibly to the amount of five thousand pounds, if the company appeared to him to be satisfactorily established.

Soon after they left the works Mr. Snodgers was obliged to leave Edward, having, as he said, “business in an opposite direction.”

But, if Edward had followed the financial agent, he would have seen him re-enter Mr. Batt’s private room, and to the evident surprise of the ironmaster resume his seat, having first carefully shut the door.

Mr. Snodgers was, as always, very placid.

“Confidence begets confidence, you know,” said he, adjusting his double eye-glass, with a sly admonitory glance at Mr. Batt.

“Well?”

“It seemed so funny that that Mr. Tupper from Swansea should get out of your window, that’s all.”

Mr. Batt looked confused, and tugged at his beard.

“If a party don’t want to see me, I don’t know why, but I generally feel a little anxious to see him. Don’t you feel that, Mr. Batt?”

Mr. Batt saw he was in a corner, and could only escape by being unusually candid. So he confessed that it was his solicitor, Mr. Gribble, who had made so unceremonious a departure. How he could be such a fool as to forget that Snodgers would observe that his room had no door but that by which he entered, he could not think.

But one answer only led to further questions, and Mr. Snodgers learned the cause of Gribble's desire to avoid a meeting with Edward in the capacity of Mr. Batt's solicitor. The ironmaster felt that the loan so much depended on Snodgers, that he gave him all Gribble's confidence.

The recital seemed to have great interest for Snodgers. He listened with an attention that would have seemed curious to Mr. Batt, but that he considered Snodgers made "his living out of other people's affairs." Yet Mr. Batt was astonished. "Had Gribble deceived him? Could it be that Snodgers was the man he feared to meet?"

"It won't affect the loan, I hope?" said Mr. Batt, nervously.

Mr. Snodgers' reply seemed inconsequent.

"Mr. Gribble's a sharp man, I should say, isn't he ?"

"As a needle."

"Ah ! I knew something of the family, that's all," replied Snodgers, vaguely. "You may make pretty sure of having the five thousand."

Mr. Batt was evidently glad to hear this. But he was puzzled. Mr. Gribble had jumped through his window to avoid these men, and now Mr. Snodgers left thoughtful and mysterious. But as to Batt's Iron Works he knew that Snodgers' interest was identical with his own, and the reflection was very reassuring.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. SNODGERS FORMS A LIMITED COMPANY.

“WHAT do you want with me, Thompson, hey?” said Mr. Royds to his head clerk. Mr. Royds was pulling on his gloves preparatory to taking his afternoon ride in Rotten Row.

“Batt’s mortgage to Mr. Edward Frankland, sir.”

“S’pose it’s all right. Tonks is a very good valuer, safe man. Yes, you had better prepare the deed.”

Mr. Royds’ maxim in his business was to

act upon the instructions of his clients. He never thwarted by unasked advice what he believed to be their wish. If Edward chose to lend his money to Mr. Batt, all Mr. Royds concerned himself about was the title of the security, and a certified opinion of its sufficiency as to value.

When the mortgage-deed was prepared it was sent to Mr. Batt for his perusal, but Mr. Gribble did not act for the iron-master in this matter.

Mr. Batt's solicitor, whoever he was, had no objections to offer, and in due time, the preliminaries being arranged, the business was concluded, Edward's five thousand pounds being transferred to Mr. Batt's account with his bankers.

It was arranged between him and Mr. Snodgers that this being settled, they should meet at the works the next morning to confer with Mr. Batt as to the formation of the company.

But while Edward saw no objection to lending his money upon a good security which was approved by so respectable a solicitor as Mr. Royds, he did not feel any increasing anxiety to join Mr. Snodgers in any commercial enterprise. Yet he was quite willing to listen to their proposals, though he intended to be very cautious in permitting the financial agent to impair the security he now held for his capital.

Still if he could only see his way to

getting ten per cent. for this money it seemed to him that he would be advancing towards the marrying position he so ardently desired to attain. The fact is, he didn't quite know what he wanted. He was unwell and nervous, alone in London, and, as he felt, without friends ; shrinking from those who perhaps would have received him kindly, because he had a sensitive fear that they wouldn't be even civil to him in his altered fortunes, resolving every day upon contradictory schemes for the future ; meanwhile, glad of anything which engaged his time and forced from him action of some sort.

Looking upon London and the wide field of endeavour it afforded to a young man, he

had felt valiant ; but a few weeks had passed, and now he seemed to be sinking in the great stream of life, cruelly ready to submerge him and to pass on unrippled over his head. A year ago and such thoughts would have been regarded by him as a passing attack of "the blues." Now he couldn't shake off a creeping sense of despondency, an undefined feeling of unworthiness of his former self. He had raised his income a hundred a year by selling out his money from the funds and lending it to Mr. Batt. But never till now had he rightly estimated the real privileges of wealth. So he thought. What was it not worth to be free from sordid considerations, from ignoble associations ?

As he lay in bed at his lodgings thinking that he had to meet Mr. Snodgers in two hours' time at the works, turning these thoughts over and over in his mind, restless and wretched, he imagined he could see how the downward path to roguery was the only road before some men. He felt sure he could never do anything dishonest. Yet in his nervous, fretful discontent he could fancy himself gliding downwards into grinding poverty, to a miserable reflection of his former self, hopeless of recognition by her he loved so dearly.

Then he sprang up, and a tub of cold water improved his prospects. As he walked down to the works he was counting his resources, and glad that he had an

engagement, even though it were with Mr. Snodgers.

Yet what a dirty place it looked. He even shrank from soiling his gloves with the handle of the counting-house door, and finding he couldn't push it open, rapped with his stick.

He could hear Mr. Snaggs' wooden leg stumping from his stool to the door. It vexed his fastidious pride to think he observed a smile of recognition in the rusty clerk's face, as though Snaggs thought there was community of interest now between them.

"No, the guv'ner ain't come yet," said Snaggs, in reply to Edward's inquiry for Mr. Batt.

What a rusty, weary wretch he looked, so much in keeping with the place in which he sat, so inharmonious with any idea of home and domestic joys, that Edward was almost inclined to wonder if he lived there on the old stool, the rotten leather of which showed in more than one place its stuffing of hay. On the bar beneath his desk there was a smooth deep notch worn by his wooden leg, and as he doubled down to his books again, one could see that the attitude was taken rather by force of habit than by the amount of work he had to do.

He wore a rusty dress suit of antique cut, his trowsers fitting tightly over the rusty top of his Wellington boots, leaving the

entire foot visible, bulgy here and there, where the upper leather, guiltless of blacking, had parted from the soles. His long, bony hands were smeared with ink, and a blot of it appeared, though not very plainly, on his dirty shirt-front. A rusty, frayed satin stock supported a collar, which seemed to be falling down into it, ashamed of days and days of wear. And above it his face, with an immortal rust upon it. His thin ragged locks of hair—he had none upon his cheeks or chin—seemed like a wretched crown of rust, and now and then he snuffed pinches of rust-coloured snuff up his nose from an iron box, to which it was probably owing that his eyes had usually a watery appearance. If ever they assumed an expression, or feebly

shared one with his large mouth, it was an expression of the smallest human cunning, such as might warn a watchful master to be careful of his pennies rather than of his cheque-book.

“And he warn’t here yesterday, neether,” added Snaggs, after a long pause, during which Edward had been standing by the fire regarding the rusty clerk.

“How does the business get on without him?”

“It don’t want much looking after. Mostly buyin’ and sellin’, one day a lot o’ scrap, then a lot o’ pigs, and maybe a horder for a lot o’ castin’s.”

There was a knock at the door.

“It’s Mr. Snodgers,” said Edward.

But it was not Mr. Snodgers. It was a postman, who handed Edward a letter. He took it mechanically, and was going to place it on Snaggs' desk, when his eye fell upon the address. It was "Edward Frankland, Esq., Batt's Iron Works, Southwark, S.E." He opened the envelope. The letter was dated three days ago, but the writer gave no address.

"DEAR SIR,—

"I am declining business, and when this is to hand shall be hundreds of miles away, never to return. There is a good opening for you as my successor, or as Mr. Snodgers thinks better, for a company. You can at once take possession. There are

some debts owing ; perhaps more than enough to cover the stock.

“Yours respectfully,

“THOS. BATT.

“P.S. Perhaps Snodgers is sharp enough to square the debts into shares.”

Edward's first feeling after reading this was one of blank dismay. He would have been less miserable by far if he had simply lost all his money and there had been an end of it. He saw he had been duped by this man, who had probably left the country directly after he obtained the five thousand pounds. Edward never reflected that he had full value for his money in the security, he was so troubled with the thought that he

was saddled with this wretched place—that he should be there waiting for such a rogue, actually waiting for a conference on something like terms of equality with Mr. Batt.

But he had not long to reflect upon the altered aspect of affairs before Mr. Snodgers arrived.

“I was detained,” said Snodgers, loftily, “with the Cotopaxi directors. Is our friend about the works?”

Edward handed him “our friend’s” letter, with an ungraciously frigid reception of Mr. Snodgers’ hand-shaking. He watched the financial agent as he read, thinking to detect complicity in his countenance.

“Well, that *is* lucky,” said Mr. Snodgers,

with a sort of pleasant emphasis, as he handed back the letter to Edward.

“What?”

“Why, I knew he was in debt, but I didn’t know it had gone quite so far as this!”

“I don’t understand you,” said Edward, wondering if he could be in any way included in the circle of which Mr. Snodgers spoke.

Mr. Snodgers threw himself into the chair, and laughed his quiet, respectable laugh.

“Don’t understand me! Why, you see, sir, we’ve got the company in our own hands now. I’ve got an agreement by which I can take the good-will without

payment, and you've got the wharf and premises ; you can't sell 'em without the business. Now d'ye see ?—why it's as neat as ninepence. All we've got to do is to arrange with the creditors so as to prevent the hubbub of a public insolvency. I know one or two of 'em. There's Plynlym, the Welsh mine owner, and Gernet, the agricultural implement maker, they'll be in rather heavily. We'll make directors of them. First-rate names. Then there's yourself ; then there's me, Joseph Snodgers, Esq., as promoter and managing director, *pro tem.* ; and we'll make Mr. Snaggs secretary."

Mr. Snodgers looked triumphantly at Edward, who began in a vague way to feel inextricably involved in the affair.

“Now look here,” said the financial agent, “I’ve just made these notes for the prospectus. ‘Iron Working Company (Limited).—Proprietor retiring in favour of the company, having realised a large fortune—Nothing to be paid for goodwill—Valuable premises and stock, ample security for capital—Large and old-established business, valuable contracts on hand; probable great extension by the company—The directors congratulate themselves on having secured the valuable services of Mr. Snaggs as secretary, whose long acquaintance with the business affords some guarantee of its value.’ There, I think I can rub that up into something; the creditors can’t say no to that! What do you say to being secretary, Mr.

Snaggs, with an increase of ten shillings a week to your wages,—eh, Mr. Snaggs?"

The rusty clerk blinked his eyes and grinned a smile.

"What'll the guv'ner say to that?" feebly suggested Snaggs.

"Mr. Batt has retired in my favour," returned Snodgers with some little importance, gleefully rubbing his hands together.

But this, combined with what he had already heard of their conversation, was too much for Snaggs' intellect, and he settled down again upon his stool to think it over.

In his own mind, when Edward had read Mr. Batt's letter, he had seen a picture of ruin, ruin to himself and to every one connected with the works. He was staggered

by Mr. Snodgers' contrary view of the case. Naturally disposed to take a hopeless view of such circumstances, he was too much bewildered to comprehend thoroughly all the design of Mr. Snodgers. But yet he felt very indignant at the cool manner in which the financial agent seemed to reckon on being allowed to include his name in what appeared to him to be a questionable business.

“But there's not a word of truth in what you propose to include in the prospectus,” he said, with an effort to speak calmly.

“'Pon my word, sir, you're quite mistaken. It may be high coloured, I don't say it ain't ; but it's all as true as my name's Snodgers.”

"I'd rather not have anything to do with it."

"Oh! that as you please; but you'll lose half your money, and have no end of bother, if you don't."

Edward did not know exactly what to do. In his utter ignorance of business he thought that Mr. Batt having absconded, all this dirty, hateful business had fallen to him. To manage it himself seemed the worst of all possible alternatives. To consult the snugly respectable Mr. Royds upon the position of affairs was only less distasteful, for he felt there would be an unctuous reproach in each word of his solicitor's. Then Snodgers seemed so quietly prepared for the catastrophe, and was so thoroughly master of

the situation, that Edward, in his nervous and weakly state of health, felt the most comfortable method by far was to let him have his way. “He can’t make me do anything dishonest,” he argued with himself. So he allowed Mr. Snodgers to continue the development of his plans.

A few days afterwards, Snodgers came to him looking most benignly happy. He had reduced the number of creditors to six, by getting these to purchase the debts of the smaller creditors ; and of these six, two, Plynllym and Gernet, were to join himself and Edward on the Board of Directors.

“Here’s a little matter for you to sign. The articles of association forming the company.” He said this to Edward, who was

unwell in bed, handing him at the same time the paper and a pen.

Edward languidly looked over the paper. He was thinking confusedly of Mr. Snodgers' notes for the prospectus, and was very agreeably surprised to find no lies in this document. Presently he met with his own name. "Mr. Edward Frankland to receive fully paid-up shares equivalent in nominal value to the amount of his mortgage, and Mr. Joseph Snodgers to receive, for promotion and for his interest in the business, an equal number of paid-up shares."

"I would much rather have the money, or half of it," said Edward, faintly.

"So would I," replied Snodgers, with astonishing gravity; "but this is the readiest

way to get it—you know your mortgage deed isn't money."

"No, indeed." Edward signed the paper near to a wafer-seal, and over his initials, which had been previously pencilled by Mr. Snodgers, and gave back the paper to the financial agent, weakly conscious that he had done a very foolish thing; and yet preferring infinitely to have done it rather than to have the burden of the business upon himself.

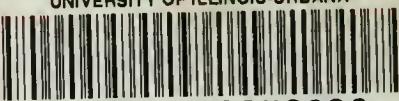
In a few weeks the shares of the Iron Working Company (Limited) were quoted at 2 premium, by means of some well-rigged sales accomplished by Mr. Snodgers, and more than five-and-twenty *bond fide* applications for shares had been received,

chiefly from what Snodgers called “country parties”—clergymen, widows, retired tradesmen, and half-pay officers.

It is needless to add that they received an allotment of shares without delay, and so enjoyed the privilege of contributing to the payment of Mr. Batt's debts and to the maintenance of Mr. Snodgers.

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